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MISTRESS AND MAID.

VOL. I.

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MISTRESS AND MAID.

BY

THE AUTHOR OF

"JOHN HALIFAX, GENTLEMAN,"

&c. &c.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

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PREFACE.

Books written "with a purpose" are so often disapproved of, that the author may as well confess openly that this book has one — a distinct, deliberate purpose, from beginning to end.

The relation between domestic servants and their employers is becoming such a serious question, that anything which any thoughtful woman, who has had some observation and experience in the matter, can say thereupon, is possibly not unworthy a hearing; even if it only rouses wiser women to think and say something more. I trust, therefore, that all who agree with me in the opinions here expressed, will disseminate this tale as widely as possible; that mistresses will send it down to the kitchen;

that benevolent ladies who are Sunday school teachers and district visitors will lend it among the poor; and that masters —if any read it, for it is not exactly a man's book — will try to circulate it among mechanics and mechanics' wives and daughters. It may thus reach the class for whom it was specially written, and with a view to whom it was originally published in "Good Words."

I also wish to say, that though, of course, the incidents of "Mistress and Maid" are purely imaginary, one character therein is not. Had I told the real history of the original of *Elizabeth Hand*, it would have been the story of a life more beautiful in its simplicity, self-denial, and self-devotion, than any fiction of mine. I have felt myself justified, not only as a tribute to the memory of the dead, but as an incentive and ensample to the living, in thus "putting into a book," literally and faithfully painted, the portrait of one who was unto the end of her days — to both God and man — a faithful servant.

MISTRESS AND MAID.

CHAPTER I.

She was a rather tall, awkward, strongly-built girl of about fifteen. This was the first impression which the maid gave to her mistresses, the Misses Leaf, when she entered their kitchen, accompanied by her mother; who was a widow and washer-woman, by name Mrs. Hand. I must confess, when they saw the damsel, the ladies felt a certain twinge of doubt as to whether they had not been rash in offering to take her into their service; whether it would not have been wiser still to have gone on in their old way—now, alas! grown into a very old way, so as almost to make them forget they had

ever had any other—and done without a servant.

Many consultations had the three sisters held together before such a revolutionary extravagance was determined on. But Miss Leaf was beginning both to look and to feel "not so young as she had been;" Miss Selina, ditto; though, being still under forty, she would not have acknowledged it for the world. And Miss Hilary, young, bright, and active as she was, could by no possibility do everything that was to be done in the little establishment; be, for instance, in three places at once—in the school-room, teaching little boys and girls —in the kitchen, cooking dinner—and in the rooms upstairs, busy at housemaid's work. Besides, much of her time was spent in waiting upon "poor Selina," who frequently was, or fancied herself, too ill to take any part in either the school or house duties.

Though, the trouble being inevitable, she said little about it, Miss Leaf's heart was often sore to see Hilary's pretty hands smeared by blacking grates, and roughened

by scouring floors. To herself this sort of thing had become natural—but Hilary!

During the time of Hilary's childhood, she, the youngest of the family, had of course been spared all housework; and afterwards her studies had left no time for it. For she was a clever girl, with a genuine love of knowledge; Latin, Greek, and even the higher branches of arithmetic and mathematics, were not beyond her range; and these studies she found much more interesting than washing dishes or sweeping floors. True, she always did whatever domestic duty she was told to do; but her inclinations were not in the household line. She had only lately learnt to "see dust," to make a pudding, to iron a shirt; and, moreover, to reflect, as she slowly woke up to the knowledge of how these things should be done, and how necessary they were—what must have been her eldest sister's lot during all these twenty years! What pains, what weariness, what incessant toil must Johanna have endured—and endured in patient

silence—in order to do all those hundred and one small household things which till now had seemed to do themselves.

Therefore, after much cogitation as to the best and most prudent way to amend matters, and perceiving with her clear common sense that, willing as she might be to work in the kitchen, her own time would be much more valuably spent in teaching their little school, it was Hilary who, these Christmas holidays, first started the bold idea, "We must have a servant." And therefore, it being necessary to begin with a very small servant, on very low wages (£3 per annum was, I fear, the maximum), did they take this Elizabeth Hand.

So, hanging behind her parent, an anxious-eyed and rather sad-voiced woman, did Elizabeth enter the kitchen of the Misses Leaf.

The ladies were all there—Johanna arranging the table for their early tea; Selina lying on the sofa, trying lazily to cut bread and butter; Hilary on her knees before the fire, making the bit of toast—

her eldest sister's one luxury. This was the picture that her three mistresses presented to Elizabeth's eyes; eyes which, though they seemed to notice nothing, in reality, as events proved, noticed everything.

"I've brought my daughter, ma'am, as you sent word you'd take on trial," said Mrs. Hand, addressing herself to Selina, who, as the tallest, the best-dressed, and the most imposing, was usually regarded by strangers as the head of the family.

"Oh, it's about the servant. Here, Johanna!"

Miss Leaf came forward, rather uncertainly, for she was of a shy nature, and had been so long accustomed to do the menial work of the household, that she felt quite awkward in the character of mistress. Instinctively she hid her poor roughened hands, that would at once have betrayed her to the sharp eyes of the working-woman, and then, ashamed of her momentary false pride, laid them outside her apron and sat down.

"Will you take a chair, Mrs. Hand? My sister told you, I believe, all our requirements. We only want a good, intelligent girl. We are willing to teach her everything."

"Thank you kindly; and I be willing and glad for her to learn, ma'am," replied the mother, her sharp and rather free tone subdued in spite of herself by the gentle voice of Miss Leaf. Of course, living in the same country town, she knew all about the three school-mistresses, and how till now they had kept no servant. "It 's her first place, and her 'll be awk'ard at first, most like. Hold up your head, Elizabeth."

"Is her name Elizabeth?"

"Far too long and too fine," observed Selina from the sofa. "Call her Betty."

"Anything you please, miss; but her name 's Elizabeth. It wor my young missis's name in my first place, where I lived till I wor married."

"We will call her Elizabeth," said Miss Leaf, with the gentle decision she could use on occasion.

There was a little more discussion be-

tween the mother and the future mistress as to holidays, Sundays, and so forth, during which time the new servant stood silent and impassive in the doorway between the back-kitchen and the kitchen, or, as it is called in those regions, the house-place.

As before said, Elizabeth was by no means a personable girl, and her clothes did not set her off to advantage. Her cotton frock hung in straight lines down to her ankles, displaying her clumsily-shod feet and woollen stockings; above it was a pinafore—a regular child's pinafore, of the cheap, strong, blue-speckled print, which in those days was generally worn. A little shabby shawl, pinned at the throat, and pinned very carelessly and crookedly, with an old black bonnet, much too small for her large head and her quantities of ill-kept hair, completed the costume. It did not impress favourably a lady who, being, or rather having been, very handsome herself, was as much alive to appearances as the second Miss Leaf.

She made several rather depreciatory

observations, and insisted strongly that the new servant should only be taken "on trial," with no obligation for them to keep her a day longer than they wished. Her uneasy feeling on the matter communicated itself to Johanna, who closed the negotiation with Mrs. Hand, by saying—

"Well, let us hope your daughter will suit us. We will give her a fair chance at all events."

"Which is all I can ax for, Miss Leaf. Her bean't much to look at, but her's willin' and sharp, and her's never told me a lie in her life. Curtsey to thy missus, and say thee 'lt do thy best, Elizabeth."

Pulled forward, Elizabeth did curtsey, but she never offered to speak. And Miss Leaf, feeling that for the sake of all parties the interview had better be shortened, rose from her chair.

Mrs. Hand took the hint and departed, saying only, "Good-bye, Elizabeth," with a nod, half-encouraging, half-admonitory, which Elizabeth silently returned. This was all the adieu between mother and daughter: they neither kissed nor shook

hands, which undemonstrative farewell somewhat surprised Hilary.

Now, Miss Hilary Leaf had all this while gone on toasting her slice of bread — luckily for it, the fire was low and black: meantime, from behind her long drooping curls (which Johanna would not let her "turn up," though she was twenty), she was making her observations on the new servant. It might be, that, possessing more head than the one and more heart than the other, Hilary was gifted with deeper perception of character than either of her sisters; but certainly her expression, as she watched Elizabeth, was rather amused and kindly than dissatisfied.

"Now, girl, take off your bonnet," said Selina, to whom Johanna had silently appealed in her perplexity as to the next proceeding with regard to the new member of the household.

Elizabeth obeyed, and then stood, irresolute, awkward, and wretched to the last degree, at the furthest end of the house-place.

"Shall I show you where to hang up

your things?" said Hilary, speaking for the first time; and at the new voice, so quick, cheerful, and pleasant, Elizabeth visibly started.

Miss Hilary rose from her knees, crossed the kitchen, took from the girl's unresisting hands the old black bonnet and shawl, and hung them up carefully on a nail behind the great eight-day clock. It was a simple action, done quite without intention, and accepted without acknowledgment, except one quick glance of that keen yet soft grey eye; but years and years after it was remembered and referred to.

And now Elizabeth stood forth in her own proper likeness, unconcealed by bonnet or shawl, or maternal protection. The pinafore scarcely covered her gaunt neck and long arms: that great head of rough, dusky hair was evidently for the first time gathered into a comb. Thence elf-locks escaped in all directions, and were for ever being pushed behind her ears, or rubbed (not smoothed; there was nothing smooth about her) back from her forehead; which Hilary noticed was low, broad, and full.

The rest of her face, except the before-mentioned eyes, was absolutely and undeniably plain. Her figure, so far as the pinafore exhibited it, was undeveloped and ungainly; the chest being contracted and the shoulders rounded, as if with carrying children or other weights while still a growing girl. In fact, nature and circumstances had apparently united in dealing unkindly with Elizabeth Hand.

Still here she was; and what was to be done with her?

Having sent her with the small burden which was apparently all her luggage, to the little room—formerly a box-closet—where she was to sleep, the Misses Leaf took serious counsel together over their tea.

Tea itself suggested the first difficulty. They were always in the habit of taking that meal, and indeed every other, in the kitchen. It saved time, trouble, and fire; besides leaving the parlour always tidy for callers, chiefly pupils' parents, and preventing these latter from discovering that the three orphan daughters of Henry Leaf, Esq., solicitor, and sisters of Henry Leaf,

Junior, Esq., also solicitor, whose sole mission in life seemed to have been to spend everything, make everybody miserable, marry, and die—that these three ladies did always wait upon themselves at meal-times, and did sometimes breakfast without butter, and dine without meat. Now, this system would not do any longer.

"Besides, there is no need for it," said Hilary, cheerfully. "I am sure we can well afford both to keep and to feed a servant, and to have a fire in the parlour every day. Why not take our meals there, and sit there regularly of evenings?"

"We must," added Selina, decidedly. "For my part, I could n't eat, or sew, or do anything with that great, hulking girl sitting staring opposite;—or standing; for how could we ask her to sit? Already, what must she have thought of us—people who take tea in the kitchen?"

"I do not think that matters," said the eldest sister, gently, after a moment's silence. "Everybody in the town knows who and what we are, or might if they chose to inquire. We cannot conceal our poverty

if we tried; and I don't think anybody looks down upon us for it. Not even since we began to keep school, which you thought was such a terrible thing, Selina."

"And it was. I have never reconciled myself to teaching the baker's two boys and the grocer's little girl. You were wrong, Johanna, you ought to have drawn the line somewhere, and it ought to have excluded tradespeople."

"Beggars cannot be choosers," said Hilary.

"Beggars!" echoed Selina.

"No, my dear, we never were that," said Miss Leaf, interposing against one of the sudden storms that were often breaking out between these two. "You know well we have never begged nor borrowed from anybody, and hardly ever been indebted to anybody, except for the extra lessons that Mr. Lyon would insist upon giving to Ascott after school-hours."

Here Johanna suddenly stopped, and Hilary, with a slight colour rising in her face, said —

"I think, sisters, we are forgetting that

the staircase is quite open, and though I am sure she has an honest look, and not that of a listener, still Elizabeth might hear. Shall I call her downstairs, and tell her to light a fire in the parlour?"

While she is doing it—and in spite of Selina's forebodings to the contrary, the small maiden did it quickly and well, especially after a hint or two from Hilary—let me take the opportunity of making a little picture of this same Hilary.

Little it should be, for she was a decidedly little woman; small altogether, hands, feet, and figure being in satisfactory proportion. Her movements, like those of most little women, were light and quick rather than elegant; yet everything she did was done with a neatness and delicacy which gave an involuntary sense of grace and harmony. She was, in brief, one of those people who are best described by the word "harmonious;" people who never set your teeth on edge, or rub you up the wrong way, as very excellent people occasionally do. Yet she was not over-meek, or unpleasantly amiable; there was a liveliness and even briskness about

her, as if the everyday wine of her life had a spice of champagniness, not frothiness, but natural effervescence of spirit, meant to "cheer but not inebriate" a household.

And in her own household this gift was most displayed. No centre of a brilliant, admiring circle could be more charming, more witty, more irresistibly amusing than was Hilary sitting by the kitchen fireside, with the cat on her knee, between her two sisters, and the schoolboy Ascott Leaf, their nephew; — which four individuals, the cat being not the least important of them, constituted the family.

In the family Hilary shone supreme. All recognised her as the light of the house, and so she had been, ever since she was born, ever since her

> Dying mother mild,
> Said, with accents undefiled,
> "Child, be mother to this child."

It was said to Johanna Leaf — who was not Mrs. Leaf's own child. But the good stepmother, who on her marriage-day had taken the little motherless girl to her bosom, and never since made the slightest difference

between her and her own children, knew well whom she was trusting.

From that solemn hour, in the middle of the night, when Johanna lifted the hour-old baby out of its dead mother's bed into her own, it became her one object in life. Through a sickly infancy, for it was a child born amidst trouble, her sole hands washed, dressed, fed it: night and day it "lay in her bosom, and was unto her as a daughter."

She was then just thirty: not too old to look forward to woman's natural destiny, a husband and children of her own. But years slipped by, and she remained Miss Leaf still. What matter? Hilary was her daughter.

Johanna's pride in her knew no bounds. Not that she showed it much: indeed, she deemed it a sacred duty not to show it; but to make believe her "child" was just like other children. But Hilary was not. Nobody ever thought she was—even in externals. Fate gave her all those gifts which are sometimes sent to make up for

the lack of worldly prosperity. Her brown eyes were as soft as doves', yet could dance with fun and mischief if they chose: her hair, brown also, with a dark-red shade in it, crisped itself in two wavy lines over her forehead, and then tumbled down in two glorious masses, which Johanna, ignorant, alas! of art, called "very untidy," and laboured in vain to quell under combs, or to arrange in proper regular curls. Her features — well, they too were good; better than these unartistic people had any idea of; better even than Selina's, who in her youth had been the belle of the town. But whether artistically correct or not, Johanna, though she would on no account have acknowledged it, believed solemnly that there was not such a face in the whole world as little Hilary's.

Possibly, a similar idea dawned on the apparently dull mind of Elizabeth Hand, for she watched her youngest mistress intently, from kitchen to parlour, and from parlour back to kitchen; and once when Miss Hilary stood giving information as to

the proper abode of broom, bellows, &c., the little maid gazed at her with such admiring observation that the scuttle she carried was tilted, and the coals were strewn all over the kitchen floor. At which catastrophe Miss Leaf looked miserable, Miss Selina spoke crossly, and Ascott, who just then came in to his tea, late as usual, burst into a shout of laughter.

It was as much as Hilary could do to help laughing herself, she being too near her nephew's own age always to maintain a dignified, aunt-like attitude; but nevertheless when, having disposed of her sisters in the parlour, she coaxed Ascott into the school-room, and insisted upon his Latin being done, she helping him, Aunt Hilary scolded him well, and bound him over to keep the peace towards the new servant.

"But she is such a queer one. Exactly like a South Sea Islander. When she stood with her grim, stolid, despairing countenance, contemplating the coals—oh, Aunt Hilary, how killing she was!"

And the regular, rollicking, irresistible boy-laugh broke out again.

"She will be great fun. Is she really to stay?"

"I hope so," said Hilary, trying to be grave. "I hope never again to see Aunt Johanna cleaning the stairs, and getting up to light the kitchen fire of winter mornings, as she will do, if we have not a servant to do it for her. Don't you see, Ascott?"

"Oh, I see," answered the boy, carelessly. "But don't bother me, please. Domestic affairs are for women, not men." Ascott was eighteen, and just about to pass out of his caterpillar state as a doctor's apprentice-lad, into the chrysalis condition of a medical student in London. "But," with sudden reflection, "I hope the girl won't be in my way. Don't let her meddle with any of my books and things."

"No; you need not be afraid. I have put all into your room. I myself cleared your rubbish out of the box-closet" —

"The box-closet. Now, really, I can't stand" —

"She is to sleep in the box-closet; where else could she sleep?" said Hilary, resolutely, though inly quaking a little; for, somehow, the merry, handsome, rather exacting lad had acquired considerable influence in this household of women. "You must put up with the loss of your 'den,' Ascott: it would be a great shame if you did not. Can't you give up such a small thing for the sake of Aunt Johanna, and the rest of us?"

"Um!" grumbled the boy, who, though he was not a bad fellow at heart, had a boy's dislike to "putting up" with the slightest inconvenience. "Well, it won't last long. I shall be off shortly. What a jolly life I'll have in London, Aunt Hilary! I'll see Mr. Lyon there, too."

"Yes," said Aunt Hilary, briefly, returning to Dido and Æneas — humble and easy Latinity for a student of eighteen; but, being apprenticed early, Ascott's education had been much neglected, till Mr. Lyon came as usher to the Stowbury grammar-school, and happening to meet and take an interest in

him, taught him and his Aunt Hilary Latin, Greek, and mathematics together, of evenings.

I shall make no mysteries here. Human nature is human nature all the world over. A tale with no love in it would be unnatural, unreal, impossible; for there are no histories and no lives without love; or if there could be, they need both pity and pardon, for they must be mere abortions of humanity.

Thank heaven, we, most of us, do not philosophise: we only live. We like one another, we hardly know why; we love one another, we still less know why. If on the day she first saw—it was in Stowbury church—Mr. Lyon's grave, heavy-browed, somewhat severe face; for he was a Scotchman, and his sharp, strong Scotch features did look "hard," beside the soft, rosy, well-conditioned Saxon youth of Stowbury; if on that Sunday any one had told Hilary Leaf that the face of this stranger was to be the one face of her life, stamped upon brain, and heart, and soul with a vividness that no after

impressions were strong enough to efface, and retained there with a tenacity that no vicissitudes of time, or place, or fortune had power to alter, Hilary would—yes, I think she would—have quietly kept looking on. She would have accepted her lot, such as it was, with its shine and shade, its joy and its anguish: it came to her without her seeking, as most of the solemn things in life do; and whatever it brought with it, it could have come from no other source than that from which all high, and holy, and pure loves ever must come—the will and permission of GOD.

Mr. Lyon himself requires no long description. In his first visit he had told Miss Leaf all about himself that there was to be known: that he was, as they were, a poor teacher, who had altogether "made himself," as so many Scotch students do. His father, whom he scarcely remembered, had been a small Ayrshire farmer; his mother was dead, and he had never had either brother or sister.

Seeing how clever Miss Hilary was, and

how, as a schoolmistress, she would need all the education she could possibly get, he had offered to teach her along with her nephew; and she and Johanna were only too thankful for the advantage. But during the teaching he had also taught her another thing, which neither had contemplated at the time—to respect him with her whole soul, and to love him with her whole heart.

Over this simple fact let no more be now said. Hilary said nothing. She recognised it herself as soon as he was gone; a plain, sad, solemn truth which there was no deceiving herself did not exist, even had she wished its non-existence. Perhaps Johanna also found it out, in her darling's extreme paleness and unusual quietness for a while; but she too said nothing. Mr. Lyon wrote regularly to Ascott, and once or twice to her, Miss Leaf; but though everyone knew that Hilary was his particular friend in the whole family, he did not write to Hilary. He had departed rather suddenly, on account of some plan which,

he said, affected his future very considerably; but which, though he was in the habit of telling them his affairs, he did not further explain. Still Johanna knew he was a good man, and though no man could be quite good enough for her darling—she liked him, she trusted him.

What Hilary felt none knew. But she was very girlish in some things; and her life was all before her, full of infinite hope. By and by her colour returned, and her merry voice and laugh were heard about the house just as usual.

This being the position of affairs, it was not surprising that after Ascott's last speech Hilary's mind wandered from Dido and Æneas, to vague listening, as the lad began talking of his grand future—the future of a medical student, all expenses being paid by his godfather, Mr. Ascott, the merchant, of Russell Square, once a shop-boy of Stowbury. Nor was it unnatural that all Ascott's anticipations of London resolved themselves, in his aunt's eyes, into the one fact that he would "see Mr. Lyon."

But in telling thus much about her mistresses, I have, for the time being, lost sight of Elizabeth Hand.

Left to herself, the girl stood for a minute or two looking around her in a confused manner, then, rousing her faculties, began mechanically to obey the order with which her mistress had quitted the kitchen, and to wash up the tea-things. She did it in a fashion that, if seen, would have made Miss Leaf thankful the ware was only the common set, and not the cherished china belonging to former days: still she did it, noisily it is true, but actively, as if her heart were in her work. Then she took a candle, and peered about her new domains.

These were small enough, at least they would have seemed so to other eyes than Elizabeth's; for, until the schoolroom and box-closet above had been kindly added by the landlord, who would have done anything to show his respect for the Misses Leaf, it had been merely a six-roomed cottage—parlour, kitchen, back-kitchen, and three

upper chambers. It was a very cosy house notwithstanding, and it seemed to Elizabeth's eyes a perfect palace.

For several minutes more she stood and contemplated her kitchen, with the fire shining on the round oaken stand in the centre, and the large wooden-bottomed chairs, and the loud-ticking clock with its tall case, the inside of which, with its pendulum and weights, had been a perpetual mystery and delight, first to Hilary's, and then to Ascott's childhood. Then there was the sofa, large and ugly, but oh! so comfortable, with its faded, flowered chintz, washed and worn for certainly twenty years. And over all, Elizabeth's keen observation was attracted by a queer machine, apparently made of thin rope and bits of wood, which hung up to the hooks on the ceiling, an old-fashioned baby's swing. Finally, her eye dwelt with content on the blue and red diamond-tiled floor, so easily swept and mopped, and (only Elizabeth did not think of that, for her hard childhood had been all work and no play) so beautiful

to whip tops upon! Hilary and Ascott, condoling together over the new servant, congratulated themselves that their delight in this occupation had somewhat faded, though it was really not so many years ago since one of the former's pupils, coming suddenly out of the school-room, had caught her in the act of slowly whipping a pensive top round this same kitchen floor.

Meantime, Elizabeth penetrated farther, investigating the back-kitchen, with its various conveniences; especially the pantry, every shelf of which was so neatly arranged and so beautifully clean. Apparently this neatness impressed the girl with a sense of novelty and curiosity; and though she could hardly be said to meditate—her mind was not sufficiently awakened for that—still, as she stood at the kitchen fire, a slight thoughtfulness deepened the expression of her face, and made it less dull and heavy than it had at first appeared.

"I wonder which on 'em does it all? They must work pretty hard, I reckon; and two o' them's such little uns."

She stood a while longer ; for sitting down appeared to be to Elizabeth as new a proceeding as thinking ; then she went up stairs, still literally obeying orders, to shut windows and pull down blinds, at night-fall. The bedrooms were small, and insufficiently, nay, shabbily furnished ; but the floors were spotless—ah, poor Johanna ! and the sheets, though patched and darned to the last extremity, were white and whole. Nothing was dirty, nothing untidy. There was no attempt at picturesque poverty—for whatever novelists may say, poverty cannot be picturesque ; but all things were decent and in order. The house, poor as it was, gave the impression of belonging to "real ladies;" ladies who thought no manner of work beneath them, and who, whatever they had to do, took the pains to do it as well as possible.

Mrs. Hand's roughly-brought-up daughter had never been in such a house before, and her examination of every new corner of it seemed quite a revelation. Her own little sleeping nook was fully as tidy and com-

fortable as the rest, which fact was not lost upon Elizabeth. That bright look of mingled softness and intelligence—the only thing which beautified her rugged face—came into the girl's eyes as she "turned down" the truckle-bed, and felt the warm blankets and sheets, new and rather coarse, but neatly sewed.

"Her 's made 'em hersel', I reckon. La!" Which of her mistresses the "her" referred to, remained unspecified; but Elizabeth, spurred to action by some new idea, went briskly back into the bed-rooms, and looked about to see if there was anything she could find to do. At last, with a sudden inspiration, she peered into a washstand, and found there an empty ewer. Taking it in one hand, and the candle in the other, she ran down stairs.

Fatal activity! Hilary's pet cat, startled from sleep on the kitchen-hearth, at the same instant ran wildly up stairs; there was a start—a stumble—and then down came the candle, the ewer, Elizabeth, and all.

It was an awful crash. It brought every member of the family to see what was the matter.

"What has the girl broken?" cried Selina.

"Where has she hurt herself?" anxiously added Johanna.

Hilary said nothing, but ran for a light, by the aid of which she picked up first the servant, then the candle, and then the fragments of crockery.

"Why, it's my ewer, my favourite ewer, and it's all smashed to bits, and I never can match it. You careless, clumsy, good-for-nothing creature!"

"Please, Selina," whispered her distressed elder sister.

"Very well, Johanna; you are the mistress, I suppose? why don't you speak to your servant?"

Miss Leaf, in an humbled, alarmed way, first satisfied herself that no bodily injury had been sustained by Elizabeth, and then asked her how this disaster had happened —for a serious disaster she felt it was.

Not only was the present loss annoying, but a servant with a talent for crockery-breaking would be a far too expensive luxury for them to think of retaining. And she had been listening in the solitude of the parlour to a long lecture from her always dissatisfied younger sister, on the great doubts Selina had about Elizabeth's "suiting."

"Come now," seeing the girl hesitated, "tell me the plain truth. How was it?"

"It was the cat!" sobbed Elizabeth.

"What a barefaced falsehood!" exclaimed Selina. "You wicked girl, how could it possibly be the cat? Do you know you are telling a lie, and that lies are hateful, and that all liars go to —"

"Nonsense; hush!" interrupted Hilary, rather sharply, for Selina's "tongue," the terror of her childhood, now merely annoyed her. Selina's temper was a long understood household fact—they did not much mind it, knowing her bark was worse than her bite—but it was provoking

that she should exhibit herself so soon before the new servant.

The latter first looked up at the lady with simple surprise: then as, in spite of the other two, Miss Selina worked herself into a downright passion, and poured unlimited abuse on the victim's devoted head, Elizabeth's manner changed. After one dogged repetition of, "It was the cat," not another word could be got out of her. She stood, her eyes fixed on the kitchen-floor, her brows knitted, and her under-lip pushed out—the very picture of sullenness. Young as she was, Elizabeth evidently had, like her unfortunate mistress, "a temper of her own"—a spiritual deformity that some people are born with, as others with hare-lip or club-foot; only, unlike these, it may be conquered; though the battle is long and sore, sometimes ending only with life.

It had plainly never commenced with poor Elizabeth Hand. Her appearance, as she stood under the flood of sharp words that streamed out upon her, was sullen, fierce, absolutely repulsive. Hilary even

began to think it would have been easier to teach all day and do house-work half the night, than have the infliction of a servant —to say nothing of the disgrace of seeing Selina's "peculiarities" so exposed before a stranger.

She knew of old that to stem the torrent was impracticable. The only chance was to let Selina expend her wrath and retire, and then to take some quiet opportunity of explaining to Elizabeth that sharp language was only her sister's way, and must be put up with. Humiliating as this was, and fatal to domestic authority, that the first thing to be taught a new servant was to "put up with" one of her mistresses, still there was no alternative. Hilary had already foreboded and made up her mind to such a possibility, but she had hoped it would not occur the very first evening.

It did, however, and its climax was worse even than she anticipated. Whether, irritated by the intense sullenness of the girl, Selina's temper was worse than usual, or whether, as is always the case with people

like her, something else had vexed her, and she vented it upon the first lesser cause of annoyance that occurred, certain it is that her tongue went on unchecked till it failed from sheer exhaustion. And then, as she flung herself on the sofa—oh, sad mischance!—she caught sight of her nephew standing at the schoolroom door, grinning with intense delight, and making faces at her behind her back.

It was too much. The poor lady had no more words left to scold with; but she rushed up to Ascott, and, big lad as he was, she soundly boxed his ears.

On this terrible climax let the curtain fall.

CHAPTER II.

Common as were the small feuds between Ascott and his Aunt Selina, they seldom reached such a catastrophe as that described in my last chapter. Hilary had to fly to the rescue, and literally drag the furious lad back into the schoolroom, while Johanna, pale and trembling, persuaded Selina to quit the field, and go and lie down. This was not difficult; for the instant she saw what she had done, how she had disgraced herself and insulted her nephew, Selina felt sorry. Her passion ended in a gush of "nervous" tears, under the influence of which she was led up stairs and put to bed almost like a child—the usual termination of these pitiful outbreaks.

For the time nobody thought of Elizabeth. The hapless cause of all stood

"spectatress of the fray," beside her kitchen fire. What she thought history sayeth not. Whether in her own rough home she was too well accustomed to see brothers and sisters quarrelling, and mothers boxing their children's ears, cannot be known; whether she was or was not surprised to see the same proceedings among ladies and gentlemen, she never betrayed; but certain it is, that the little servant became uncommonly serious; yes, serious rather than sulky, for her "black" looks vanished gradually, as soon as Miss Selina left the kitchen.

On the re-appearance of Miss Hilary the sullenness had quite gone. But Hilary took no notice of her; she was in search of Johanna, who, shaking and cold with agitation, came slowly down stairs.

"Is Selina gone to bed?"

"Yes, my dear. It was the best thing for her; she is not at all well to-day."

Hilary's lip curled a little, but she replied not a word. She had not the patience with Selina that Johanna had. She drew her elder sister into the little parlour, placed

her in the arm-chair, shut the door, came and sat beside her, and took her hand.

Johanna pressed it, shed a few quiet tears, and wiped them away. Then the two sisters remained silent, with hearts sad and sore.

Every family has its skeleton in the house; this was theirs. Whether they acknowledged it or not, they knew quite well that every discomfort they had, every slight jar which disturbed the current of household peace, somehow or other originated in "poor Selina." They often called her "poor" with a sort of pity—not unneeded, heaven knows!—for if the unhappy are to be pitied, ten times more so are those who make others miserable.

This was Selina's case, and had been all her life. And, sometimes, she herself recognised it. Sometimes, after an especially bad outbreak, her compunction and remorse would be almost as terrible as her passion; forcing her sisters to make every excuse for her; she "did not mean it," it was only "ill health,"

or "nerves," or her "unfortunate way of taking things."

But they knew in their hearts that not all their poverty, and the toils it entailed, not all the hardships and humiliations of their changed estate, were half so bitter to bear as this something—no moral crime, and yet in its results as fatal as crime—which they called Selina's "way."

Ascott was the only one who did not attempt to mince matters. When a little boy he had openly declared he hated Aunt Selina; when he grew up he as openly defied her; and it was a most difficult matter to keep even decent peace between them. Hilary's wrath had never gone farther than wishing Selina was married; that appearing the easiest way to get rid of her. Latterly she had ceased this earnest aspiration; it might be, because, learning to think more seriously of marriage, she felt that a woman who is no blessing in her own household, is never likely much to bless a husband's; and that, looking still farther forward, it was on the whole a mercy of Providence

which made Selina not the mother of children.

Yet her not marrying had been somewhat a surprise to them all; for she had been attractive in her day; handsome in person, and agreeable in society. But perhaps, for all that, the sharp eye of the opposite sex had discovered the cloven foot; since, though she had received various promising attentions, poor Selina had never had an offer. Nor fortunately had she ever been known to care for anybody; she was one of those women who would have married as a matter of course, but who never would have been guilty of the weakness of falling in love. There seemed small probability of shipping her off, to carry into a new household the restlessness, the fretfulness, the captious fault-finding with others, the readiness to take offence at what was done and said to herself, which made poor Selina Leaf the unacknowledged grief and torment of her own.

Her two sisters sat silent. What was the

use of talking? It would be only going over and over again the old thing; trying to ease and shift a little the long-familiar burden, which they knew must be borne. Nearly every household has, near or remote, some such burden, which Heaven only can lift off or help to bear. And sometimes, looking round the world outside, these two congratulated themselves, in a half sort of way, that compared with others' theirs was light; Selina being, after all, a well-meaning, well-principled woman, and, in spite of her little tempers, really fond of her family, at least as fond as any one can be, whose nature has its centre entirely in self.

Only when Hilary looked, as to-night, into her eldest sister's pale face, where year by year the lines of age were deepening, and saw how every agitation such as the present shook her more and more—she who ought to have a quiet life and a cheerful home, after so many hard years—then Hilary, fierce in the resistance of her youth, felt as if what she could have borne for herself she could not bear for Johanna. At the moment,

she sympathised with Ascott in actually "hating" Aunt Selina.

"Where is that boy? He ought to be spoken to," Johanna said at length, rising wearily.

"I have spoken to him; I gave him a good scolding. He is sorry, and promises never to be so rude again."

"Oh, no; not till the next time," replied Miss Leaf, hopelessly. "But, Hilary," with a sudden consternation, "what are we to do about Elizabeth?"

The younger sister had thought of that. She had turned over in her mind all the pros and cons, the inevitable "worries" that would result from the presence of an additional member of the family, especially one from whom the family skeleton could not be hid, to whom it was already only too fatally revealed.

But Hilary was a clear-headed girl, and she had the rare faculty of seeing things as they really were, undistorted by her own likings or dislikings—in fact, without reference to herself at all. She perceived

plainly that Johanna ought not to do the housework, that Selina would not, and that she could not—*ergo*, they must keep a servant. Better, perhaps, a small servant, over whom they could have the same influence as over a child, than one older and more independent, who would irritate her mistresses at home, and chatter of them abroad. Besides, they had promised Mrs. Hand to give her daughter a fair trial. For a month, then, Elizabeth was bound to stay; afterwards, time would show. It was best not to meet troubles half way.

This explained, in Hilary's cheerful voice, seemed greatly to reassure and comfort her sister.

"Yes, love, you are right; she must remain her month out, unless she does something very wrong. Do you think that really was a lie she told?"

"About the cat? I don't quite know what to think. Let us call her, and put the question once more. Do you put it, Johanna. I don't think she could look in your face, and tell you a story."

Other people, at sight of that sweet, grave countenance, its bloom faded, and hairs silvered long before their time, yet beautiful, with an almost childlike simplicity and childlike peace—most other people would have been of Hilary's opinion.

"Sit down; I'll call her. Dear me, Johanna, we shall have to set up a bell as well as a servant, unless we had managed to combine the two."

But Hilary's harmless little joke failed to make her sister smile; and the entrance of the girl seemed to excite positive apprehension. How was it possible to make excuse to a servant for her mistress's shortcomings? how scold for ill-doing this young girl, to whom, ere she had been a night in the house, so bad an example had been set? Johanna half expected Elizabeth to take a leaf out of Selina's book, and begin abusing herself and Hilary.

No; she stood very sheepish, very uncomfortable, but not in the least bold or sulky—on the whole, looking rather penitent and humble.

Her mistress took courage.

"Elizabeth, I want you to tell me the truth about that unfortunate breakage. Don't be afraid. I had rather you broke everything in the house than have told me what was not true."

"It *was* true; it was the cat."

"How could that be possible? You were coming down stairs with the ewer in your hand."

"Her got under my feet, and throwed me down, and so I tumbled, and smashed the thing agin the floor."

The Misses Leaf glanced at each other. This version of the momentous event was probable enough, and the girl's eager, honest manner gave internal confirmatory evidence pretty strong.

"I am sure she is telling the truth," said Hilary. "And remember what her mother said about her word being always reliable."

This reference was too much for Elizabeth. She burst out, not into actual crying, but into a smothered choke.

"If you donnot believe me, missis, I'd rather go home to mother."

"I do believe you," said Miss Leaf, kindly; then waited till the pinafore, used as a pocket-handkerchief, had dried up grief and restored composure.

"I can quite well understand the accident now; and I am sure, if you had put it as plainly at first, my sister would have understood it too. She was very much annoyed, and no wonder. She will be equally glad to find she was mistaken."

Here Miss Leaf paused, somewhat puzzled how to express what she felt it her duty to say, so as to be comprehended by the servant, and yet not let down the dignity of the family. Hilary came to her aid.

"Miss Selina is sometimes hasty; but she means kindly always. You must take care not to vex her, Elizabeth; and you must never answer her back again, however sharply she speaks. It is not your business; you are only a child, and she is your mistress."

"Is her? I thought it was this 'un."

The sudden clouding of Elizabeth's face, and her blunt pointing to Miss Leaf as "this 'un," were too much for Hilary's gravity. She was obliged to retreat to the press, and begin an imaginary search for a book.

"Yes, I am the eldest, and I suppose you may consider me specially as your mistress," said Johanna, simply. "Remember always to come to me in any difficulty; and, above all, to tell me everything outright, as soon as it happens. I can forgive you almost any fault, if you are truthful and honest; but there is one thing I never could forgive, and that is deception. Now go with Miss Hilary, and she will teach you how to make the porridge for supper."

Elizabeth obeyed, silently; she had apparently a great gift for silence. And she was certainly both obedient and willing: not stupid, either, though a nervousness of temperament, which Hilary was surprised to find in so big and coarse-looking a girl, made her rather awkward at first. How-

ever, she succeeded in pouring out, and carrying into the parlour, without accident, three platefuls of that excellent condiment which formed the frugal supper of the family; but which they ate, I grieve to say, in heterodox southern fashion, with sugar or treacle, until Mr. Lyon—greatly horrified thereby—had instituted his national custom of "supping" porridge with milk.

It may be a very unsentimental thing to confess, but Hilary, who even at twenty was rather practical than poetical, never made the porridge without thinking of Robert Lyon, and the day when he first stayed to supper, and ate it—or as he said, and was very much laughed at, ate "them" —with such infinite relish. Since then, whenever he came, he always asked for his porridge, saying it carried him back to his childish days. And Hilary, with that curious pleasure that women take in waiting upon any one unto whom the heart is ignorantly beginning to own the allegiance, humble yet proud, of Miranda to Ferdinand—

> To be your fellow
> You may deny me; but I'll be your servant
> Whether you will or no —

Hilary contrived always to make his supper herself.

Those pleasant days were now over; Mr. Lyon was gone. As she stood alone over the kitchen fire, she thought—as now and then she let herself think for a minute or two in her busy prosaic life—of that August night, standing at the front door, of his last "good-bye," and last hand-clasp, tight, warm, and firm; and somehow she, like Johanna, trusted in him.

Not exactly in his love; it seemed almost impossible that *he* should love *her*, at least till she grew much more worthy of him than now; but in himself, that he would never be less himself, never less thoroughly good and true than now. That, some time, he would be sure to come back again, and take up his old relations with them, brightening their dull life with his cheerfulness; infusing into their feminine household the new element of a clear, strong, energetic, manly

will, which sometimes made Johanna say that instead of twenty-five the young man might be forty; and, above all, bringing into their poverty the silent sympathy of one who had fought his own battle with the world—a hard one, too, as his face sometimes showed—though he never said much about it.

Of the results of this pleasant relation—whether, she being the only truly marriageable person in the house, Robert Lyon's visits were with the intention of marrying her, or he was expected to do so, or society would consider it a very odd thing if he did not do so—this unsophisticated Hilary never thought at all. If he had said to her that the present state of things was to go on for ever, she to remain always Hilary Leaf, and he Robert Lyon, the faithful friend of the family, she would, in her entire ignorance of life and the world, have smiled in his face and been perfectly satisfied.

True, she had never had anything to drive away the smile from that innocent

face; no vague jealousies aroused; no ill-natured irritating rumours afloat in the small circle that was his and theirs. Mr. Lyon, grave and sedate in all his ways, never paid the slightest attention to, or expressed the slightest interest in, any woman whatsoever—except herself.

And so this hapless girl loved him—just himself: without the slightest reference to his "connexions," for he had none; or his "prospects," which, if he had any, she did not know of. Alas! to practical and prudent people I can offer no excuse for her; except, perhaps, what Shakspeare gives in the creation of his poor Miranda.

When the small servant re-entered the kitchen, Hilary, with a half sigh, shook off her dreams, called Ascott out of the school-room, and returned to the work-a-day world and the family supper.

This being ended, seasoned with a few quiet words administered to Ascott, and which on the whole he took pretty well, it was nearly ten o'clock.

"Far too late to have kept such a child as

Elizabeth out of her bed; we must not do it again," said Miss Leaf, taking down the large Bible with which she was accustomed to conclude the day—Ascott's early hours at school and their own house-work making it difficult of mornings. Very brief the reading was, sometimes not more than half a dozen verses, with no comment thereon; she thought the Word of God might safely be left to expound itself. Being a very humble-minded woman, she did not feel qualified to lead long devotional "exercises," and she disliked formal written prayers. So she merely read the Bible to her family, and said after it the Lord's Prayer.

But, constitutionally shy as Miss Leaf was, to do even this in presence of a stranger cost her some effort; and it was only a sense of duty that made her say "yes" to Hilary's suggestion, "I suppose we ought to call in Elizabeth?"

Elizabeth came.

"Sit down," said her mistress; and she sat down, staring uneasily round about her, as if wondering what was going to befall

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her next. Very silent was the small parlour; so small that it was almost filled up by its large square piano, its six cane-bottomed chairs, and one easy-chair, in the which sat Miss Leaf, with the great Book in her lap.

"Can you read, Elizabeth?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Hilary, give her a Bible."

And so Elizabeth followed, guided by her not too clean finger, the words, read in that soft, low voice, somewhere out of the New Testament; words simple enough for the comprehension of a child or a heathen. The "South Sea Islander," as Ascott long persisted in calling her, then, doing as the family did, turned round to kneel down; but in her confusion she knocked over a chair, causing Miss Leaf to wait a minute till reverent silence was restored. Elizabeth knelt, with her eyes fixed on the wall: it was a green paper, patterned with bunches of nuts. How far she listened, or how much she understood, it was impossible to say; but her manner was decent and decorous.

"*Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those that trespass against us.*" Unconsciously Miss Leaf's gentle voice rested on these words, so needed in the daily life of every human being, and especially of every family. Was she the only one who thought of "poor Selina?"

They all rose from their knees, and Hilary put the Bible away. The little servant "hung about," apparently uncertain what was next to be done, or what was expected of her to do. Hilary touched her sister.

"Yes," said Miss Leaf, recollecting herself, and assuming the due authority, "it is quite time for all the family to be in bed. Take care of your candle, and mind and be up at six to-morrow morning."

This was addressed to the new maiden, who dropped a courtesy, and said, almost cheerfully, "Yes, ma'am."

"Very well. Good night, Elizabeth."

And following Miss Leaf's example, the other two, even Ascott, said civilly and kindly, "Good night, Elizabeth."

CHAPTER III.

The Christmas holidays ended, and Ascott left for London. It was the greatest household change the Misses Leaf had known for years, and they missed him sorely. Ascott was not exactly a loveable boy, and yet, after the fashion of womankind, his aunts were both fond and proud of him; fond, in their childless old-maidenhood, of any sort of nephew, and proud, unconsciously, that the said nephew was a big fellow, who could look over all their heads, besides being handsome and pleasant-mannered, and though not clever enough to set the Thames on fire, still sufficiently bright to make them hope that in his future the family star might again rise.

There was something pathetic in these three women's idealisation of him—even Selina's, who, though quarrelling with him

to his face, always praised him behind his back—that great, good-looking, lazy lad; who, everybody else saw clearly enough, thought more of his own noble self than of all his aunts put together. The only person he stood in awe of was Mr. Lyon—for whom he always protested unbounded respect and admiration. How far Robert Lyon liked Ascott even Hilary could never quite find out; but he was always very kind to him.

There was one person in the house who, strange to say, did not succumb to the all-dominating youth. From the very first there was a smouldering feud between him and Elizabeth. Whether she overheard, and slowly began to comprehend his mocking gibes about the "South Sea Islander," or whether her sullen and dogged spirit resisted the first attempts the lad made to "put upon her"—as he did upon his aunts, in small daily tyrannies—was never found out; but certainly Ascott, the general favourite, found little favour with the new servant. She never answered when he

"hollo'd" for her; she resisted blacking his boots more than once a day; and she obstinately cleared the kitchen fire-place of his "messes," as she ignominiously termed various pots and pans belonging to what *he* called his "medical studies."

Although the war was passive rather than aggressive, and sometimes a source of private amusement to the aunts, still on the whole it was a relief when the exciting cause of it departed; his new and most gentlemanly portmanteau being carried downstairs by Elizabeth herself, of her own accord, with an air of cheerful alacrity, foreign to her mien for some weeks past, and which, even in the midst of the dolorous parting, amused Hilary extremely.

"I think that girl is a character," she said afterwards to Johanna. "Anyhow, she has curiously strong likes and dislikes."

"You may say that, my dear; for she brightens up whenever she looks at you."

"Does she? Oh, that must be because I have most to do with her. It is wonderful how friendly one gets over saucepans and

brooms; and what reverence one inspires in the domestic mind when one really knows how to make a bed or a pudding."

"How I wish you had to do neither," sighed Johanna, looking fondly at the bright face and light little figure that was flitting about, putting the schoolroom to rights before the pupils came in.

"Nonsense; I don't wish any such thing. Doing it makes me not a whit less charming and lovely." She often applied these adjectives to herself, with the most perfect conviction that she was uttering a fiction patent to everybody. "I must be very juvenile also, for I'm certain his fellow-passenger at the station to-day took me for Ascott's sweetheart. When we were saying good-bye, an old gentleman who sat next him was particularly sympathetic, and you should have seen how indignantly Ascott replied, 'It's only *my aunt*!'"

Miss Leaf laughed, and the shadow vanished from her face, as Hilary had meant it should. She only said, caressing her—

"Well, my pet, never mind; I hope you may have a real sweetheart some day."

"I'm in no hurry, thank you, Johanna."

But now was heard the knock after knock of the little boys and girls, and there began that monotonous daily round of school labour, rising from the simplicities of c, a, t, cat, and d, o, g, dog, to the sublime heights of Pinnock and Lennie, Télémaque and Latin Delectus. No loftier — Stowbury being well supplied with first-class schools, and having a vague impression that the Misses Leaf, born ladies, and not brought up as governesses, were not competent educators except of very small children.

Which was true enough until lately. So Miss Leaf kept contentedly to the c, a, t, cat, and d, o, g, dog, of the little butchers and bakers, as Miss Selina, who taught only sewing, and came into the school-room but little during the day, scornfully termed them. The higher branches were gradually left to Hilary, who, of late, possibly out of sympathy with a friend of hers,

had begun to show an actual gift for teaching school.

It is a gift, all will allow; and chiefly those who have it not, amongst whom was poor Johanna Leaf. The admiring envy with which she watched Hilary, moving briskly about from class to class, with a word of praise to one and rebuke to another, keeping everyone's attention alive, spurring on the dull, controlling the unruly, and exercising over every member in this little world that influence, at once the strongest and most intangible and inexplicable—personal influence—was only equalled by the way in which, at pauses in the day's work, when it grew dull and monotonous, or when the stupidity of the children ruffled her own quick temper beyond endurance, Hilary watched Johanna.

The time I am telling of is now long ago. The Stowbury children, who were then little boys and girls, are now fathers and mothers—doubtless a large proportion being decent tradesfolk in Stowbury still; though, in this locomotive quarter, many

must have drifted off elsewhere—where, Heaven knows! But not a few of them may still call to mind Miss Leaf, who first taught them their letters, sitting in her corner between the fire and the window, while the blind was drawn down to keep out, first, the light from her own fading eyes, and secondly, the distracting view of green fields and trees from the youthful eyes by her side. They may remember still her dark plain dress and her white apron, on which the primers, torn and dirty, looked half ashamed to lie; and, above all, her sweet face and sweeter voice, never heard in anything sharper than that grieved tone which signified their being "naughty children." They may recall her unwearied patience with the very dullest and most wayward of them—her unfailing sympathy with every infantile pleasure and pain. And I think they will acknowledge that whether she taught them much or little—in this advancing age it might be thought little—Miss Leaf taught them one thing—to love her; which, as Ben Jonson said of the

Countess of Pembroke, was in itself a "liberal education."

Hilary too! Often when Hilary's younger and more restless spirit chafed against the monotony of her life, when instead of wasting her days in teaching small children, she would have liked to be learning, learning—every day growing wiser and cleverer, and stretching out into that busy, bright active world of which Robert Lyon had told her—then the sight of Johanna's meek face, bent over those dirty spelling-books, would at once rebuke and comfort her. She felt, after all, that she would not mind working on for ever, so long as Johanna still sat there.

Nevertheless, that winter seemed to her very long, especially after Ascott was gone. For Johanna, partly for money, and partly for kindliness, had added to her day's work four evenings a week, when a half-educated mother of one of her little pupils came to be taught to write a decent hand, and to keep the accounts of her shop. Upon which Selina, highly indignant, had taken

to spending her evenings in the school-room, interrupting Hilary's solitary studies there by many a lamentation over the peaceful days when they all sat in the kitchen together and kept no servant. For Selina was one of those who never saw the bright side of anything till it had gone by.

"I'm sure I don't know how we are to manage with Elizabeth. That greedy"—

"And growing," suggested Hilary.

"I say, that greedy girl eats as much as any two of us. And as for her clothes—her mother does not keep her even decent."

"She would find it difficult upon three pounds a year."

"Hilary, how dare you contradict me? I am only stating a plain fact."

"And I another. But, indeed, I don't want to talk, Selina."

"You never do, except when you are wished to be silent; and then your tongue goes like any race-horse."

"Does it?—Well, like Gilpin's,

> It carries weight! it rides a race!
> 'T is for a thousand pound!

— and I only wish it were. Heigho! if I could but earn a thousand pounds!"

Selina was too vexed to reply: and for five quiet minutes Hilary bent over her Homer, which Mr. Lyon had taken such pleasure in teaching her, because, he said, she learnt it faster than any of his grammar-school boys. She had forgotten all domestic grievances in a vision of Thetis and the water-nymphs; and was repeating to herself, first in the sonorous Greek, and then in Pope's small but sweet English, that catalogue of oceanic beauties, ending with

> Black Janira and Janassa fair,
> And Amatheia with her amber hair.

"Black, did you say? I'm sure she was as black as a chimney-sweep all to-day. And her pinafore"—

"Her what? Oh, you mean Elizabeth"—

"Her pinafore had three rents in it, which she never thinks of mending, though I gave her needles and thread myself a week ago. But she does not know how to use them any more than a baby."

"Possibly nobody ever taught her."

"Yes; she went for a year to the National School, she says, and learnt both marking and sewing."

"Perhaps she has never practised them since. She could hardly have had time, with all the little Hands to look after, as her mother says she did. All the better for us. It makes her wonderfully patient with our troublesome brats. It was only to-day, when that horrid little Jacky Smith hurt himself so, that I saw Elizabeth take him into the kitchen, wash his face and hands, and cuddle him up and comfort him quite motherly. Her forte is certainly children."

"You always find something to say for her."

"I should be ashamed if I could not find something to say for anybody who is always abused."

Another pause — and then Selina returned to the charge.

"Have you ever observed, my dear, the extraordinary way she has of fastening, or

rather not fastening, her gown behind? She just hooks it together at the top and at the waist, while between there is a —"

"*Hiatus valde deflendus.* O dear me! what shall I do for quiet! Selina, how can I help it if a girl of fifteen years old is not a paragon of perfection—as of course *we* all are—if we only could find it out?"

And Hilary, in despair, rose to carry her candle and books into the chilly but peaceful bedroom, biting her lips the while lest she should be tempted to say something which Selina called "impertinent;" as perhaps it was, from a younger sister to an elder. I do not set Hilary up as a perfect character. Through sorrow only do people go on to perfection: and sorrow, in its true meaning, this cherished girl had never known.

But that night, talking to Johanna before they went to sleep—they had always slept together since the time when the elder sister used to walk the room of nights with the puling, motherless infant in her arms—

Hilary anxiously started the question of the little servant.

"I am afraid I vexed Selina greatly about her to-night; and yet what can one do? Selina is so very unjust—always expecting impossibilities. She would like to have Elizabeth at once a first-rate cook, a finished housemaid, and an attentive lady's-maid, and all without being taught! She gives her things to do, neither waiting to see if they are comprehended by her, nor showing her how to do them. Of course the girl stands gaping and staring, and does not do them, or does them so badly that she gets a thorough scolding."

"Is she very stupid, do you think?" asked Johanna, in unconscious appeal to her pet's stronger judgment.

"No, I don't. Far from stupid; only very ignorant, and—you would hardly believe it—very nervous. Selina frightens her. She gets on extremely well with me."

"Anyone would, my dear. That is," added the conscientious elder sister, still afraid of making the "child" vain, "anyone

with whom you took pains. But do you think we ever can make anything out of Elizabeth? Her month ends to-morrow. Shall we let her go?"

"And perhaps get in her place a story-teller—a tale-bearer—even a thief. No, no; let us

> Rather bear the ills we have,
> Than fly to others that we know not of;

and a thief would be worse than even a South Sea Islander."

"Oh, yes, my dear," said Johanna, with a shiver.

"By-the-bye, the first step in the civilization of the Polynesians was giving them clothes. And I have heard say that crime and rags often go together; that a man unconsciously feels he owes something to himself and society in the way of virtue when he has a clean face and clean shirt and a decent coat on. Suppose we try the experiment of dressing Elizabeth? How many old gowns have we?"

The number was few. Nothing in the

Leaf family was ever cast off till its very last extremity of decay; the talent that

Gars auld claes look amaist as gude 's the new

being especially possessed by Hilary. She counted over her own wardrobe and Johanna's, but found nothing that could be spared.

"Yes, my love, there is one gown—your brown merino. You certainly shall never put on that old thing again; though you have laid it by so carefully, as if you meant it to come out as fresh as ever next winter. No, Hilary, you must have a new dress, and you must give Elizabeth your brown merino."

Hilary laughed, and replied not.

Now it might be a pathetic indication of a girl who had very few clothes, but Hilary had a superstitious weakness concerning hers. Every dress had its own peculiar chronicle of the scenes where it had been, the enjoyments she had shared in it. Particular dresses were special memorials of her loves, her pleasures, her little passing pains:

as long as a bit remained of the poor old fabric, the sight of it recalled them all.

This brown merino—in which she had sat two whole winters over her Greek and Latin by Robert Lyon's side, which he had once stopped to touch and notice, saying what a pretty colour it was, and how he liked soft-feeling dresses for women—to cut up this old brown merino seemed to hurt her so, she could almost have cried.

Yet what would Johanna think if she refused? And there was Elizabeth absolutely in want of clothes. "I must be growing very wicked," thought poor Hilary.

She lay a good while silent in the dark, while Johanna planned and re-planned—calculating how, even with the addition of an old cape of her own, which was out of the same piece, this hapless gown could be made to fit the gaunt frame of Elizabeth Hand. Her poor kindly brain was in the last extremity of muddle, when Hilary, with a desperate effort, dashed in to the rescue, and soon made all clear, contriving body, skirt, sleeves, and all.

"You have the best head in the world, my love. I don't know whatever I should do without you."

"Luckily, you are never likely to be tried. So give me a kiss; and good night, Johanna."

Probably many will say I am writing about small, ridiculously small things. Yet is not the whole of life made up of infinitesimally small things? And in its strange and solemn mosaic, the full pattern of which we never see clearly till looking back on it from far away, dare we say of anything which the hand of Eternal Wisdom has put together, that it is too common or too small?

CHAPTER IV.

While her anxious mistresses were thus talking her over, the servant lay on her humble bed and slept. They knew she did, for they heard her heavy breathing through the thin partition-wall. Whether, as Hilary suggested, she was too ignorant to notice the days of the week or month, or, as Selina thought, too stupid to care for anything beyond eating, drinking, and sleeping, Elizabeth manifested no anxiety about herself or her destiny. She went about her work just as usual; a little more quickly and readily, now she was becoming familiarised to it; but she said nothing. She was undoubtedly a girl of silent and undemonstrative nature.

"Sometimes still waters run deep," said Miss Hilary.

"Nevertheless, there are such things as

canals," replied Johanna. "When do you mean to have your little talk with her?"

Hilary did not know. She was sitting rather more tired than usual by the school-room fire, the little people having just departed for their Saturday half-holiday. Before clearing off the *débris* which they always left behind, she stood a minute at the window, refreshing her eyes with the green field opposite, and the far-away wood, crowned by a dim white monument, visible in fair weather, on which those bright brown eyes had a trick of lingering, even in the middle of school-hours. For the wood and the hill beyond belonged to a nobleman's "show" estate, five miles off—the only bit of real landscape beauty that Hilary had ever beheld. There, during the last holidays but one, she, her sisters, her nephew, and by his own special request, Mr. Lyon—had spent a whole, long, merry midsummer day. She wondered whether such a day would ever come again!

But spring was coming again, anyhow: the field looked smiling and green, dotted

here and there with white dots which, she opined, might possibly be daisies. She half wished she was not too old and dignified to dart across the road, leap the sunk fence, and run to see.

"I think, Johanna — Hark! what can that be?"

For at this instant somebody came tearing down the stairs, opened the front door, and did — exactly what Hilary had just been wishing to do.

"It's Elizabeth, without her bonnet or shawl, with something white flying behind her. How she is dashing across the field! What can she be after? Just look!"

But loud screams from Selina's room, the front one, where she had been lying in bed all morning, quite obliterated the little servant from their minds. The two sisters ran hastily upstairs.

Selina was sitting up, in undisguised terror and agitation.

"Stop her! Hold her! I'm sure she has gone mad. Lock the door—or she'll come back and murder us all."

"Who? Elizabeth? Was she here? What has been the matter?"

But it was some time before they could make out anything. At last they gathered that Elizabeth had been waiting upon Miss Selina, putting vinegar-cloths on her head, and doing various things about the room. "She is very handy when one is ill," even Selina allowed—

"And I assure you, I was talking most kindly to her: about the duties of her position, and how she ought to dress better, and be more civil-behaved, or else she never could expect to keep any place. And she stood in her usual sulky way of listening, never answering a word—with her back to me, staring right out of window. And I had just said, 'Elizabeth, my girl' —indeed, Hilary, I was talking to her in my very kindest way"—

"I 've no doubt of it—but do get on"—

"When she suddenly turned round, snatched a clean towel from a chair-back, and another from my head—actually from my very head, Johanna—and out she ran.

I called after her, but she took no more notice than if I had been a stone. And she left the door wide open—blowing upon me. Oh dear! she has given me my death of cold." And Selina broke into piteous complainings.

Her elder sister soothed her as well as she could, while Hilary ran down to the front-door and looked everywhere for Elizabeth. She was not to be seen on field or road; and on making inquiries along the terrace, not a neighbour had even perceived her quit the house.

"It's a very odd thing," said Hilary, returning. "What can have come over the girl? You are sure, Selina, that you said nothing which"—

"Now, I know what you are going to say. You are going to blame me. Whatever happens in this house, you always blame me. And perhaps you're right. Perhaps I am a nuisance—a burden; that would be far better dead and buried—as I wish I were!"

When Selina took this tack, of course

her sisters were silenced. They quieted her a little, and then went down and searched the house all over.

All was in order; at least in as much order as was to be expected the hour before dinner. The bowl of half-peeled potatoes stood on the back kitchen "sink;" the roast was down before the fire; the knives were ready for cleaning. Evidently Elizabeth's flight had not been premeditated.

"It 's all nonsense about her going mad. She has as sound a head as I have," said Hilary to Johanna, who began to look seriously uneasy. "She might have run away in a fit of passion, certainly; and yet that is improbable; her temper is more sullen than furious. And having no lack of common sense, she must know that doing a thing like this is enough to make her lose her place at once."

"Yes," said Johanna, mournfully, "I 'm afraid after this she must go."

"Wait and see what she has to say for herself," pleaded Hilary. "She will surely be back in two or three minutes."

But she was not, nor even in two or three hours.

Her mistresses' annoyance became displeasure, and that again subsided into serious apprehension. Even Selina ceased talking over and over the incident which gave the sole information to be arrived at; rose, dressed, and came down to the kitchen. There, after a long and anxious consultation, Hilary, observing that "somebody had better do something," began to prepare the dinner, as in pre-Elizabethan days; but the ladies' appetites were small.

About three in the afternoon, Hilary, giving utterance to the hidden alarm of all, said—

"I think, sisters, I had better go down as quickly as I can to Mrs. Hand's."

This agreed, she stood consulting with Johanna as to what could possibly be said to the mother in case that unfortunate child had not gone home, when the kitchen door opened, and the culprit appeared.

Not, however, with the least look of a culprit. Hot she was, and breathless, and

with her hair down about her ears, and her apron rolled up round her waist, presented a most forlorn and untidy aspect; but her eyes were bright and her countenance glowing.

She took a towel from under her arm. "There's one on 'em—and you'll get back —the other—when it's washed."

Having blurted out this, she leaned against the wall, trying to recover her breath.

"Elizabeth! Where have you been? How dared you to go? Your behaviour is disgraceful—most disgraceful I say. Johanna, why don't you speak to your servant?" (When, for remissness in reproving others, the elder sister fell herself under Selina's reproof, it was always emphatically "*your* sister"—"*your* nephew"—"*your* servant.")

But, for once, Miss Selina's sharp voice failed to bring the customary sullen look to Elizabeth's face; and when Miss Leaf, in milder tones, asked where she had been, she answered unhesitatingly —

"I've been down the town."

"Down the town!" the three ladies cried, in one chorus of astonishment.

"I 've been as quick as I could, missis. I runned all the way, there and back; but it was a good step, and he was some'at heavy, though he is but a little 'un."

"He! who on earth is *he*?"

"Deary me! I never thought of axing his name; but his mother lives in Hall Street. Somebody saw me carrying him to the doctor, and went and told her. Oh! he was welly killed, Miss Leaf—the doctor said so; but he 'll do now, and you 'll get your towel clean washed to-morrow."

While Elizabeth spoke so incoherently, and with such unwonted energy and excitement, Johanna looked as if she thought her sister's fears were true, and the girl had really gone mad; but Hilary's quicker perceptions jumped at a different conclusion.

"Quiet yourself, Elizabeth," said she, taking a firm hold of her shoulder, and making her sit down, when the rolled-up apron dropped, and showed itself all covered with blood spots. Selina screamed outright.

Then Elizabeth seemed to become half-conscious that she had done something blameable, or was at least a suspected character. Her warmth of manner faded; the sullen cloud of dogged resistance to authority was rising in her poor dirty face, when Hilary, beginning with, "Now, we are not going to scold you; but we must hear the reason of this," contrived by adroit questions to elicit the whole story.

It appeared that, while standing at Miss Selina's window, Elizabeth had watched three little boys, apparently engaged in a very favourite amusement of little boys in that field, going quickly behind a horse, and pulling out the longest and handsomest hairs in his tail, to make fishing-lines of. She saw the animal give a kick, and two of the boys run away; the other did not stir. For a minute or so she noticed the dark lump lying motionless in the grass; then, with the quick instinct for which nobody had ever given her credit, she guessed what had happened, and did immediately the wisest

and only thing possible under the circumstances, namely, to snatch up a towel, run across the field, bind up the child's head as well as she could, and carry it, bleeding and insensible, to the nearest doctor, who lived nearly a mile off.

She did not tell—and they only found it out afterwards—how she had held the boy while under the doctor's hands, the skull being so badly fractured that the frightened mother fainted at the sight: how she had finally carried him home, and left him comfortably settled in bed, his senses restored, and his life saved.

"Ay, my arms do ache above a bit," she said, in answer to Miss Leaf's question. "He wasn't quite a baby—nigh upon twelve, I reckon; but then he was very small of his age. And he looked just as if he was dead—and he bled so."

Here, just for a second or two, the colour left the big girl's lips, and she trembled a little. Miss Leaf went to the kitchen cupboard, and took out their only bottle of

wine—administered in rare doses, exclusively as medicine.

"Drink this, Elizabeth; and then go and wash your face and eat your dinner. We will talk to you by-and-bye."

Elizabeth looked up with a long, wistful stare of intense surprise, "Have I done anything wrong, missis?"

"I did not say so. But drink this; and don't ask questions, child."

She was obeyed. Presently Elizabeth disappeared into the back kitchen, emerged thence with a clean face, hands, and apron, and went about her afternoon business as if nothing had happened.

Her mistresses' threatened "talk" with her never came about. What, indeed, could they say? No doubt the little servant had broken the strict letter of domestic law by running off in that highly eccentric and inconvenient way; but, as Hilary tried to explain by a series of most ingenious reasonings, she had fulfilled, in the spirit, the very highest law—that of charity. She had also shown prompt courage, deci-

sion, practical and prudent forethought, and, above all, entire self-forgetfulness.

"And I should like to know," said Miss Hilary, warming with her subject, "if those are not the very qualities which go to constitute a hero?"

"But we don't want a hero; we want a maid-of-all-work."

"I'll tell you what we want, Selina. We want a *woman*; that is, a girl with the making of a good woman in her. If we can find that, all the rest will follow. For my part, I would rather take this girl, rough as she is, but with her truthfulness, conscientiousness, kindliness of heart, and evident capability of both self-control and self-devotedness, than the most finished servant we could find. My advice is—let us keep her."

This settled the matter, since it was a curious fact that the "advice" of the youngest Miss Leaf was, whether they knew it or not, almost equivalent to a family ukase.

When Elizabeth had brought in the tea-things, which she did with especial care, apparently wishing to blot out the memory

of her morning's escapade by astonishingly good behaviour for the rest of the day, Miss Leaf called her, and asked if she knew that her month of trial ended this day ?

"Yes, ma'am," with something between the formal courtesy of the old-world family domestic—as her mother might have been to the Miss Elizabeth Something she was named after—and the abrupt "dip" of the modern National school girl, which constituted Elizabeth Hand's sole notion of manners.

"If you had not been absent, I should have gone to speak to your mother about you this afternoon. Indeed, Miss Hilary was going, when you came in; but it would have been with a very different intention from what we had in the morning. However, that is not likely to happen again."

"Eh ?" said Elizabeth, inquiringly.

Miss Leaf hesitated, and looked uneasily at her two sisters. It was always a trial to her shy nature to find herself the mouthpiece of the family; and this same shyness made it still more difficult to break through

the stiff barriers which seemed to rise up between her, a gentlewoman well on in years, and this coarse working-girl. She felt, as she often complained, that with the kindest intentions she did not quite know how to talk to Elizabeth.

"My sister means," said Hilary, "that as we are not likely to have little boys half-killed in the field every day, she trusts you will not be running away again as you did this morning. She feels sure that you would not do a thing like this, putting us all to so great annoyance and uneasiness, for any less cause than such as happened to-day. You promise that?"

"Yes, Miss Hilary."

"Then we quite forgive you as regards ourselves. Nay"—feeling, in spite of Selina's warning nudge, that she had hardly been kind enough—"we rather praise than blame you, Elizabeth. You acted for the very best as regarded the poor little fellow. And if you like to stay with us, and will do your best to improve, we are willing to keep you as our servant."

"Thank you, ma'am. Thank you, Miss Hilary. Yes, I 'll stop."

She said no more—but sighed a great sigh, as if her mind were relieved—("So," thought Hilary, "she was not so indifferent to us as we imagined")—and bustled back into her kitchen.

"Now as to clothing her," observed Miss Leaf, also looking much relieved that the decision was over. "You know what we agreed upon; and there is certainly no time to be lost. Hilary, my dear, suppose you bring down your brown merino?"

Hilary went without a word.

People who inhabit the same house, eat, sit, and sleep together—loving one another and sympathising with one another, ever so deeply and dearly—nevertheless must inevitably have times when the intense solitude in which we all live, and must ever live, at the depth of our being, forces itself painfully upon the heart. Johanna could not but have had many such times when Hilary was a child: Hilary experienced one now.

She unfolded the old frock, and took out

of its pocket, a hiding-place at once little likely to be searched, and harmless if discovered, a poor little memento of that happy midsummer-day—

"*Dear Miss Hilary,—To-morrow then I shall come. Yours truly,*

"*Robert Lyon.*"

This was the only scrap of note she had ever received from him; he always wrote to Johanna; as regularly as ever, or more so, now Ascott was gone; but still only to Johanna. Hilary read over the two lines, wondered where she should keep them now, that Johanna might not notice them; and then recoiled, as if her poor little secret were a wrong to that dear sister who loved her so well.

"But nothing makes me love her less; nothing ever could. She thinks me quite happy, as I hope I am; and yet—oh, if I did not miss him so!"

And the aching, aching want which sometimes came over her, began again. Let us not blame her. God made all our human needs. God made love. Not merely

affection, but actual *love*, the necessity to seek and find out some other being, not another but the complement of one's-self—the "other half," who brings rest and strength for weakness, sympathy in aspiration, and tenderness for tenderness, as no other person ever can. Perhaps, even in marriage, this love is seldom found, and it is possible in all lives to do without it. Johanna had done so. But then she had been young, and was now growing old; and Hilary was only twenty, with a long life before her. Poor child, let us not blame her!

She was not in the least sentimental, her natural disposition inclining her to be more than cheerful, actually gay. She soon recovered herself, and when, a short time after, she stood, scissors in hand, demonstrating how very easy it was to make something out of nothing, her sisters never suspected how very near tears had lately been to those bright eyes, which were always the sunshine of the house.

"You are giving yourself a world of trouble," said Selina. "If I were you, I

would just make over the dress to Elizabeth, and let her do what she could with it."

"My dear, I always find I give myself twice the trouble by expecting people to do what they can't do. I have to do it myself afterwards. Prove how a child who can't even handle a needle and thread, is competent to make a gown for herself, and I shall be most happy to secede in her favour."

"Nay," put in the eldest sister, afraid of a collision of words, "Selina is right; if you do not teach Elizabeth to make her own gowns, how can she ever learn?"

"Johanna, your arguments are most brilliant! Besides—you know you don't like the parlour littered with rags and cuttings. You wish to get rid of me for the evening? Well, I 'll go! Hand me the work-basket and the bundle; and I 'll give my first lesson in dress-making to our South Sea Islander."

But Fate stood in the way of Miss Hilary's good intentions.

She found Elizabeth not, as was her wont, always busy over the perpetual toil of those

who have not yet learned the mysterious art of lessening labour by arrangement and order, nor, as sometimes, hanging sleepily over the kitchen fire, waiting for bed-time; but actually sitting—sitting down at the table. Her candle was flaring on one side of her; on the other was the school-room inkstand, a scrap of waste paper, and a pen. But she was not writing; she sat with her head on her hands, in an attitude of disconsolate idleness, so absorbed that she seemed not to hear Hilary's approach.

"I did not know you could write, Elizabeth."

"No more I can," was the answer, in the most doleful of voices. "It bean't no good. I 've forgotten all about it. T' letters wonna join."

"Let me look at them." And Hilary tried to contemplate gravely the scrawled and blotted page, which looked very much as if a large spider had walked into the ink-bottle and then walked out again on a tour of investigation. "What did you want to write?" asked she, suddenly.

Elizabeth blushed violently. "It was the woman, Mrs. Cliffe, t' little lad's mother, you know; she wanted somebody to write to her brother as is at work in Birmingham, and I said I would. I 'd learned at the National, but I 've forgotten it all. I 'm just what Miss Selina often says—I 'm good for nowt."

"Come, come, never fret;" for there was a sort of choke in the girl's voice. "There 's many a good person who never learnt to write. But I don't see why you should not learn. Shall I teach you?"

Utter amazement, beaming gratitude, succeeded one another, plain as light, in Elizabeth's eyes; but she only said, "Thank you, Miss Hilary."

"Very well. I have brought you an old gown of mine, and was going to show you how to make it up for yourself, but I 'll look over your writing instead. Sit down, and let me see what you can do."

In a state of nervous trepidation, pitiful to behold, Elizabeth took the pen. Terrible scratches resulted; blots innumerable;

and one fatal deluge of ink, which startled from their seats both mistress and maid, and made Hilary thankful that she had taken off her better gown for a common one, as, with sad thriftiness, the Misses Leaf always did of evenings.

When Elizabeth saw the mischief she had done, her contrition and humility were unbounded. "No, Miss Hilary, you can't make nothin' of me. I be too stupid. I 'll give it up."

"Nonsense!" And the bright, active little lady looked steadily into the heavy face of this undeveloped girl, half child, half woman, until some of her own spirit seemed to be reflected there. Whether the excitement of the morning had roused her, or her mistresses' kindness had touched Elizabeth's heart, and—as in most women—the heart was the key to the intellect; or whether the gradual daily influence of her changed life during the last month had been taking effect, now for the first time to appear—certain it is that Hilary had never perceived before what an extremely

intelligent face it was; what good sense was indicated in the well-shaped head and forehead; what tenderness and feeling in the deep-set grey eyes.

"Nonsense," repeated she. "Never give up anything; I never would. We 'll try a different plan, and begin from the very beginning, as I do with my little scholars. Wait, while I fetch a copy-book out of the parlour press."

She highly amused her sisters with a description of what she called "her newly-instituted Polynesian Academy;" returned, and set to work to guide the rough, coarse hand through the mysteries of caligraphy.

To say this was an easy task, would not be true. Nature's own laws and limits make the using of faculties, which have been unused for generations, very difficult at first. To suppose that a working man, the son of working men, who applies himself to study, does it with as little trouble as your upper-class children, who have been unconsciously undergoing education ever since the cradle, is a great mistake. All

honour, therefore, to those who do attempt, and to ever so small a degree succeed in, the best and surest culture of all, self-culture.

Of this honour Elizabeth deserved her share.

"She is stupid enough," Hilary confessed, after the lesson was over; "but there is a dogged perseverance about the girl which I actually admire. She blots her fingers, her nose, her apron, but she never gives in; and she sticks to the grand principle of one thing at a time. I think she did two whole pages of a's, and really performed them satisfactorily, before she asked to go on to b's. Yes! I believe she will do."

"I hope she will do her work, at any rate," said Selina, breaking into the conversation rather crossly. "I'm sure I don't see the good of wasting time over teaching Elizabeth to write, when there's so much to be done in the house by one and all of us, from Monday morning till Saturday night."

"Ay, that's it," answered Hilary, medi-

tatively. "I don't see how I ever shall get time to teach her, and she is so tired of nights when the work is all done; she'll be dropping asleep with the pen in her hand—I have done it myself before now."

Ay, that was in those days when, trying hard to improve her mind, so as to make herself a little more equal and companionable to another mind she knew, she had, after her daily house cares and her six hours of school-teaching, attempted at nine P.M. to begin close study on her own account. And though with her strong will she succeeded tolerably, still, as she told Johanna, she could well understand how slow was the "march of intellect" (a phrase which had just then come up) among day-labourers and the like; and how difficult it was for these Mechanics' Institutions, which were now talked so much of, to put any new ideas into the poor tired heads, rendered sluggish and stupid with hard bodily labour.

"I wish I could hold my Polynesian Academy on a rest day—on Sunday for

instance?" and she looked inquiringly at her sisters, especially Johanna.

Now the Misses Leaf were old-fashioned country folk, who lived before the words Sabbatarian and un-Sabbatarian had ever got into the English language. They simply "remembered the Sabbath-day to keep it holy;" they arranged so as to make it for all the household a day of rest; and they went regularly to church once —sometimes Selina and Hilary went twice. For the intervening hours, their usual custom was to take an afternoon walk in the fields: begun chiefly for Ascott's sake, to keep the lad out of mischief, and put into his mind better thoughts than he was likely to get from his favourite Sunday recreation of sitting on the wall throwing stones. After he left for London, there was Elizabeth to be thought of; and they decided that the best Sabbath duty for the little servant was to go and see her mother. So they gave her every Sunday afternoon free; only requiring that she should be at home

punctually after church-time, at eight o'clock. But from thence till bed-time was a blank two hours, which, Hilary had noticed, Elizabeth not unfrequently spent in dozing over the fire.

"And I wonder," said she, giving the end of her long meditation out loud, "whether going to sleep is not as much Sabbath-breaking as learning to write? What do you say, Johanna?"

Johanna, simple, God-fearing woman as she was, to whom faith and love came as natural as the breath she drew, had never perplexed herself with the question. She only smiled acquiescence. But Selina was greatly shocked. Teaching to write on a Sunday! Bringing the week-day work into the day of rest! Doing one's own pleasure on the holy day! She thought it exceedingly wrong. Such a thing had never been heard of in their house. Whatever else might be said of them, the Leafs were always a respectable family as to keeping Sunday. Nobody could say that even poor Henry —

But here Selina's torrent of words stopped.

When conversation revived, Hilary, who had been at first half annoyed and half amused, returned seriously to her point.

"I might say that writing is n't Elizabeth's week-day work, and that teaching her is not exactly doing my own pleasure; but I won't creep out of the argument by a quibble. The question is, *What* is keeping the Sabbath-day 'holy?' I say—and I stick to my opinion—that it is by making it a day of worship—a rest day—a cheerful and happy day—and by doing so much good in it as we can. And therefore I mean to teach Elizabeth to write on a Sunday."

"She 'll never understand it. She 'll consider it work."

"And if she did, work is a more religious thing than idleness. I am sure I often feel that, of the two, I should be less sinful in digging potatoes in my garden, or sitting mending stockings in my parlour, than in keeping Sunday as some people do—going to church genteelly in my best clothes, eating a huge Sunday dinner, and then

nodding over a good book, or taking a regular Sunday nap, till bed-time."

"Hush, child," said Johanna, reprovingly; for Hilary's cheeks were red, and her voice angry. She was taking the hot youthful part, which, in its hatred of shams and forms, sometimes leads—and not seldom led poor Hilary—a little too far on the other side. "I think," Miss Leaf added, "that our business is with ourselves, and not with our neighbours. Let us keep the Sabbath according to our consciences. Only, I would take care never to do anything which jarred against my neighbour's feelings. I would, like Paul, 'eat no meat while the world standeth,' rather than 'make my brother to offend.'"

Hilary looked into her sister's sweet, calm face, and the indignation died out of her own.

"Shall I give up my academy?" she said, softly.

"No, my love. It is lawful to do good on the Sabbath-day, and teaching a poor ignorant girl to write is an absolute good.

Make her understand that, and you need not be afraid of any harm ensuing."

"You never will make her understand," said Selina, sullenly. "She is only a servant."

"Nevertheless, I 'll try."

Hilary could not tell how far she succeeded in simplifying to the young servant's comprehension this great question, involving so many points—which, as she spoke, seemed opening out before her so widely and awfully, that she herself involuntarily shrank from it, and wondered that poor finite creatures should ever presume to squabble about it at all.

But one thing the girl did understand — her young mistress's kindness. She stood watching the little delicate hand that had so patiently guided hers, and now wrote copy after copy for her future benefit. At last she said —

"You 're taking a deal o' trouble wi' a poor wench, and it 's very kind in a lady like you."

Miss Hilary was puzzled what answer

to make. True enough, it was "kind," and she was "a lady;" and between her and Mrs. Hand's rough daughter was an unmistakable difference and distinction. That Elizabeth perceived it, was proved by her growing respectfulness of manner—the more respectful, it seemed, the more she herself improved. Yet Hilary could not bear to make her feel more sharply than was unavoidable the great gulf that lies and ever must lie—not so much between mistress and servant, in their abstract relation — (and yet that is right, for the relation and authority is ordained of God) — but between the educated and the ignorant, the coarse and the refined.

"Well," she said, after a pause of consideration, "you always have it in your power to repay my 'kindness' as you call it. The cleverer you become, the more useful you will be to me; and the more good you grow, the better I shall like you."

Elizabeth smiled — that wonderfully bright, sudden smile which seemed to cover over all her plainness of feature.

"Once upon a time," Hilary resumed, "when England was very different from what it is now, English ladies used to have what they call 'bower-women,' whom they took as girls, and brought up in their service; teaching them all sorts of things — cooking, sewing, spinning, singing, and, probably, except that the ladies of that time were very ill-educated themselves, to read and write also. They used to spend part of every day among their bower-women; and as people can only enjoy the company of those with whom they have some sympathies in common, we must conclude that—"

Here Hilary stopped, recollecting she must be discoursing miles above the head of *her* little bower-maiden, and that, perhaps, after all, her theory would be best kept to herself, and only demonstrated practically.

"So, Elizabeth, if I spend a little of my time in teaching you, you must grow up my faithful and attached bower-maiden?"

"I 'll grow up anything, Miss Hilary, if

it 's to please you," was the answer, given with a smothered intensity that quite startled the young mistress.

"I do believe the girl is getting fond of me," said she, half touched, half laughing, to Johanna. "If so, we shall get on. It is just as with our school-children, you know. We have to seize hold of their hearts first, and their heads afterwards. Now Elizabeth's head may be uncommonly tough, but I do believe she likes me."

Johanna smiled; but she would not for the world have said—never encouraging the smallest vanity in her child—that she did not think this circumstance so very remarkable.

CHAPTER V.

A HOUSEHOLD exclusively composed of women has its advantages and its disadvantages. It is apt to become somewhat narrow in judgment, morbid in feeling, absorbed in petty interests, and bounding its vision of outside things to the small horizon which it sees from its own fireside. But, on the other hand, by this fireside often abides a settled peace and purity, a long-suffering, generous forbearance, and an enduring affectionateness, which the other sex can hardly comprehend or credit. Men will not believe what is nevertheless the truth, that we can "stand alone" much better than they can: that we can do without them far easier, and with less deterioration of character, than they can do without us; that we are better able to pro-

vide for ourselves interests, duties, and pleasures; in short, strange as it may appear, that we have more real self-sustaining independence than they.

Of course, that the true life, the highest life, is that of man and woman united, no one will be insane enough to deny; I am speaking of the substitute for it, which we have so often to fall back upon, and make the best of; a better best very frequently than what appears best in the eyes of the world. In truth, many a troubled, care-ridden, wealthy family, torn with dissensions, or frozen up in splendid formalities, might have envied that quiet, humble, maiden household of the Misses Leaf, where their only trial was poverty, and their only grief the one which they knew the worst of, and had met patiently for many a year—poor Selina's "way."

I doubt not it was good for Elizabeth Hand that her first place—the home in which she received her first impressions—should have been this feminine establishment, simple and regular, in which neither

waste nor disorder was allowed. Good, too, that while her mistresses' narrow means restricted her in many things enjoyed by servants in richer families, their interests, equally narrow, caused to be concentrated upon herself a double measure of thought and care. She became really "one of the family;" a sharer in all its concerns. From its small and few carnal luxuries, such as the cake, fruit, or pot of preserve—votive offerings from pupils' parents—up to the newspaper and the borrowed book, nothing was either literally or metaphorically "locked up" from Elizabeth.

This grand question of locking-up had been discussed in full conclave the day after her month of probation ended; the sisters taking opposite sides, as might have been expected. Selina was for the immediate introduction of a locksmith and a key-basket.

"While she was only on trial, it did not so much signify; besides, if it did, we have only buttons on the press-doors; but now she is our regular servant, we ought to

institute a regular system of authority. How can she respect a family that never locks up anything?"

"How can we respect a servant from whom we lock up everything?"

"Respect a servant! What do you mean, Hilary?"

"I mean, that if I did not respect a servant, I would be very sorry to keep her one day in any house of mine."

"Wait till you 've a house of your own to keep, Miss," said Selina, crossly. "I never heard such nonsense. Is that the way you mean to behave to Elizabeth? Leave everything open to her—clothes, books, money; trust her with all your secrets; treat her as your most particular friend?"

"A girl of fifteen would be rather an inconvenient particular friend! and I have happily few secrets to trust her with. But if I could not trust her with our coffee, tea, sugar, and so on, and bring her up from the very first in the habit of being trusted, I would recommend her being sent away to-morrow."

"Very fine talking; and what do you say, Johanna?—if that is not an unnecessary question, after Hilary has given her opinion."

"I think," replied the elder sister, taking no notice of the long familiar inuendo, "that in this case Hilary is right. How people ought to manage in great houses, I cannot say; but in our small house it will be easier and better not to alter our simple ways. Trusting the girl—if she is a good girl—will only make her the more trustworthy; if she is bad, we shall the sooner find it out, and let her go."

But Elizabeth did not go. A year passed; two years; her wages were raised, and with them her domestic position. From a "girl" she was converted into a regular servant; her pinafores gave place to grown-up gowns and aprons, and her rough head, at Miss Selina's incessant instance, was concealed by a cap—caps being considered by that lady as the proper and indispensable badge of servanthood.

To say that during her transition state,

or even now that she had reached the cap era, Elizabeth gave her mistresses no trouble, would be stating a self-evident improbability. What young lass under seventeen, of any rank, does not cause plenty of trouble to her natural guardians? Who can "put an old head on young shoulders?" or expect from girls at the most unformed and unsatisfactory period of life that complete moral and mental discipline, that unfailing self-control, that perfection of temper, and everything else—which, of course, all mistresses always have?

I am obliged to confess that Elizabeth had a few—nay, not a few—most obstinate faults; that no child tries its parents, no pupil its school-teachers, more than she tried her three mistresses at intervals. She was often thoughtless and careless, brusque in her manner, slovenly in her dress; sometimes she was downright "bad," filled full—as some of her elders and betters are, at all ages—with absolute "naughtiness;" when she would sulk for hours and days together, and make the whole family uncomfortable,

as many a servant can make many a family, small as that of the Misses Leaf.

But still they never lost what Hilary termed their "respect" for Elizabeth; they never found her out in a lie, a meanness, or an act of deception or dishonesty. They took her faults as we must take the surface-faults of all connected with us—patiently rather than resentfully, seeking to correct rather than to punish. And though there were difficult elements in the household, such as there being three mistresses to be obeyed, the youngest mistress a thought too lax, and the second one undoubtedly too severe, still no girl could live with these high-principled, much-enduring women, without being impressed with two things, which the serving class are slowest to understand—the dignity of honest poverty, and the beauty of that which is the only effectual law to bring out good and restrain evil—the law of lovingkindness.

Two fracas, however, must be chronicled, for after both the girl's dismissal hung on a thread. The first was when Mrs. Cliffe,

mother of Tommy Cliffe, who was nearly killed in the field, being discovered to be an ill sort of woman, and in the habit of borrowing from Elizabeth stray shillings, which were never returned, was forbidden the house; Elizabeth resented it so fiercely that she sulked for a whole week afterwards.

The other and still more dangerous crisis in Elizabeth's destiny was when a volume of Scott's novels, having been missing for some days, was found hidden in her bed; and she, lying awake reading it, was thus ignominiously discovered at eleven P.M. by Miss Selina, in consequence of the gleam of candle-light from under her door.

It was true, neither of these errors was an actual moral crime. Hilary even roused a volley of sharp words upon herself, by declaring they had their source in actual virtues; that a girl who would stint herself of shillings, and hold resolutely to any liking she had, even if unworthy, had a creditable amount of both self-denial and fidelity in her disposition. Also, that a tired-out

maid-of-all-work, who was kept awake of nights by her ardent appreciation of the "Heart of Mid-Lothian," must possess a degree of both intellectual and moral capacity which deserved cultivation rather than blame. And though this surreptitious pursuit of literature under difficulties could not of course be allowed, I grieve to say that Miss Hilary took every opportunity of not only giving the young servant books to read, but of talking to her about them. And also that a large proportion of these books were—to Miss Selina's unmitigated horror—absolutely fiction! stories, novels, even poetry—books that Hilary liked herself—books that had built up in her her own passionate dream of life; wherein all the women were faithful, tender, heroic, self-devoted; and all the men were—something not unlike Robert Lyon.

Did she do harm? Was it, as Selina and even Johanna said sometimes, "dangerous" thus to put before Elizabeth a standard of ideal perfection, a Quixotic notion of life—life in its full purpose, power, and beauty

— such as otherwise never could have crossed the mind of this poor working girl, born of parents who, though respectable and worthy, were in no respect higher than the common working class? I will not argue the point: I am not making Elizabeth a text for a sermon; I am simply writing her story.

One thing was certain, that by degrees the young woman's faults lessened; even that worst of them, the unmistakable bad temper, not aggressive, but obstinately sullen, which made her and Miss Selina sometimes not on speaking terms for a week together. But she simply "sulked;" she never grumbled or was pert; and she did her work just as usual—with a kind of dogged struggle not only against the superior powers, but against something within herself, much harder to fight with.

"She makes me feel more sorry for her than angry with her," Miss Leaf would sometimes say coming out of the kitchen with that grieved face which was the chief sign of displeasure her sweet nature ever

betrayed. "She will have up-hill work through life, like us all, and more than many of us, poor child!"

But gradually Elizabeth, too, copying involuntarily the rest of the family, learned to put up with Miss Selina; who, on her part, kept a sort of armed neutrality. And once, when a short but sharp illness of Johanna's shook the household from its even tenor, startled everybody out of their little tempers, and made them cling together and work together in a sort of fear-stricken union against one common grief, Selina allowed that they might have gone farther and fared worse, on the day they engaged Elizabeth.

After this illness of his aunt, Ascott came home. It was his first visit since he had gone to London; Mr. Ascott, he said, objected to holidays. But now, from some unexplained feeling, Johanna in her convalescence longed after the boy—no longer a boy, however, but nearly twenty, and looking fully his age. How proud his aunts were to march him up the town, and hear

everybody's congratulations on his good looks and polished manners! It was the old story — old as the hills! I do not pretend to invent anything new. Women, especially maiden aunts, will repeat the tale to the end of time, so long as they have youths belonging to them on whom to expend their natural tendency to clinging fondness, and ignorant, innocent hero-worship. The Misses Leaf, ay, even Selina, whose irritation against the provoking boy was quite mollified by the elegant young man, were no wiser than their neighbours.

But there was one person in the household who still obstinately refused to bow the knee to Ascott. Whether it was, as psychologists might explain, some instinctive polarity in their natures; or whether, having once conceived a prejudice, Elizabeth held on to it like grim death; still there was the same unspoken antagonism between them. The young fellow took little notice of her, except to observe, "that she hadn't grown any handsomer;" but Elizabeth watched him with a keen severity

that overlooked nothing, and resisted, with a passive pertinacity that was quite unconquerable, all his encroachments on the family habits, all the little self-pleasing ways which Ascott had been so long used to, that neither he nor his aunts apparently recognised them as selfish.

"I canna bear to see him" ("*cannot*," suggested her mistress, who, seeing no reason why Elizabeth should not speak the Queen's English as correctly as herself, had insisted upon *h*'s, and stopped a few more glaring provincialisms), "I cannot bear to see him, Miss Hilary, lolling on the arm-chair, when Missis looks so tired and pale. And why should he sit up o' nights, burning double fires, and going upstairs at last with his boots on, waking everybody? I dunnot like it, I say."

"You forget; Mr. Ascott has his studies. He must work for his next examination."

"Why doesn't he get up of a morning, then, instead of lying in bed, and keeping the breakfast about till ten o'clock? Why can't he do his learning by daylight? Day-

light's cheaper than mould candles, and a deal better for the eyes."

Hilary was puzzled. A truth was a truth, and to try and make it out otherwise, even for the dignity of the family, was something from which her honest nature revolted. Besides, the sharp-sighted servant would be the first to detect the inconsistency of one law of right for the parlour and another for the kitchen. So she took refuge in silence, and in the apple-pudding she was making.

But she resolved to seize the first opportunity of giving Ascott, by way of novelty, the severest lecture that tongue of aunt could bestow. And this chance occurred the same afternoon, when the other two aunts had gone out to tea, to a house which Ascott voted "slow," and declined visiting. She remained to make tea for him, and in the meantime took him for a constitutional up and down the public walks hard by.

Ascott listened at first very good-humouredly; once or twice calling her "a dear little prig," in his patronising way—he was

rather fond of patronising his aunt Hilary. But when she seriously spoke of his duties, as no longer a boy but a man, who ought now to assume the true manly right of thinking for, and taking care of, other people, especially his aunts, Ascott began to flush up angrily.

"Now, stop that, Aunt Hilary; I'll not have you coming Mr. Lyon over me."

"What do you mean?"

For of late Ascott had said very little about Mr. Lyon—not half so much as Mr. Lyon, in his steadily persistent letters to Miss Leaf, told her about her nephew Ascott.

"I mean, that I'll not be preached to like that by a woman. It's bad enough to have to stand it from a man; but then Lyon's a real sharp fellow, who knows the world, which women don't, Aunt Hilary. Besides, he coaches me in my Latin and Greek; so I let him pitch into me now and then. But I won't let *you*; so just stop it, will you."

Something new in Ascott's tone—in-

dicating the resentful fierceness of the man rather than the pettishness of the boy, frightened his little aunt, and silenced her. However, she took comfort from the reflection that, as the lad had in his anger betrayed, he had beside him in London a monitor whose preaching, she felt sure, would be much wiser and more effectual than her own. So she determined to say no more.

The rare mention of Mr. Lyon's name—for, time and absence having produced their natural effect, except when his letters came, he was now seldom talked about in the house—set Hilary thinking.

"Do you go to see him often?" she said at last.

"Who?—Mr. Lyon?" And Ascott, delighted to escape into a fresh subject, became quite cheerful and communicative. "Oh, bless you! he wouldn't like my going to him. He lives in a two-pair back, only one room, 'which serves him for kitchen and parlour and all;' dines at a cook-shop for ninepence a day, and makes his own porridge night and morning. He

told me so once, for he isn't a bit ashamed of it. But he must be precious hard-up sometimes. However, as he contrives to keep a decent coat on his back, and pay his classes at the University, and carry off the very best honours going there, nobody asks any questions. That 's the good of London, Aunt Hilary," said the young fellow, drawing himself up with great wisdom. "Only look like a gentleman, behave yourself as such, and nobody asks any questions about you."

"Yes," acquiesced vaguely Aunt Hilary. And then her mind wandered yearningly to the solitary student in the two-pair back. He might labour and suffer; he might be ill; he might die—equally solitary, and "nobody would ask any questions." This phase of London life let a new light in upon her. Mr. Lyon's letters to Johanna had been chiefly filled with whatever he thought would interest her. With his characteristic Scotch reserve, he had said very little about himself, except in the last, wherein he mentioned that he

had "done pretty well" at college this term, and meant to "'go in for more work' immediately."

What this work entailed—how much more toil—how much more poverty—Hilary knew not. Perhaps even his successes, which Ascott went on to talk of, had less place in her thoughts than the picture of the face she knew so well, sharpened by illness, wasted with hard work and solitary care.

"And I cannot help him—I cannot help him!" was her bitter cry; until, passing from the dreamland of fancy, the womanly home-loving nature asserted itself. She thought, if it were to be her blessed lot to be chosen by Robert Lyon, how she would take care of him! what an utter slave she would be to him! How no penury would frighten her, no household cares oppress or humble her, if done for him and for his comfort. To her brave heart no battle of life seemed too long or too sore, if only it were fought for him and at his side. And as the early-falling leaves

were blown in gusts across her path, and the misty autumn night began to close in, Nature herself seemed to plead in unison with the craving of her heart, which sighed that youth and summer last not always; and that, "be it ever so humble," as the song says, there is no place so bright and beautiful as the fireside of a married home.

While the aunt and nephew were strolling thus, thinking of very different things, their own fire, newly lit—Ascott liked a fire—was blazing away in solitary glory, for the benefit of all passers-by. At length one—a gentleman—stopped at the gate, and looked in, then took a turn to the end of the terrace, and stood gazing in once more. Something apparently troubled him, and made him hesitate; twice his hand was on the latch before he opened it, and knocked at the front-door.

Elizabeth appeared, and stared hard at the stranger.

"Is Miss Leaf at home?"

"No, sir."

"Is she well? Are all the family well?" and he stepped right into the passage, with the freedom of a familiar foot.

("I should ha' slammed the door in his face," was Elizabeth's comment afterwards, "only, you see, Miss Hilary, he looked a real gentleman.")

The gentleman and she mutually examined one another.

"I think I have heard of you," said he, smiling. "You are Miss Leaf's servant—Elizabeth Hand."

"Yes, sir," still grimly, and with a determined grasp of the door-handle.

"If your mistresses are likely to be home soon, will you allow me to wait for them? I am an old friend of theirs. My name is Lyon."

Now Elizabeth was far too much one of the family not to have heard of such a person. And his knowing her name too was a tolerable proof of his identity; besides, unconsciously, the girl was influenced by that look and mien of true gentlemanhood, as courteous to the poor maid-of-all-work as

he would have been to any duchess born; and by that bright, sudden smile which came like sunshine over his face, and like sunshine warmed and opened the heart of everyone who met it.

It opened that of Elizabeth. She relaxed her Cerberus keeping of the door, and even went so far as to inform him that Miss Leaf and Miss Selina were out to tea, and Miss Hilary and Mr. Ascott, gone a walk, would be at home shortly. He was welcome to wait in the parlour if he liked.

Afterwards, seized with mingled curiosity and misgiving, she made various errands to go in and look at him; but she had not courage to address him, and he never spoke to her. He sat by the window, gazing out into the gloaming. Except just turning his head at her entrance, she did not think he had once stirred the whole time.

Elizabeth returned to her kitchen, and stood listening for her young mistress's familiar knock. Mr. Lyon seemed to have listened too, for before she

could reach it, the door was already opened by him.

There was a warm greeting—to Elizabeth's great relief; for she knew she had broken the domestic laws in admitting a stranger unawares—and then she heard them all three go into the parlour, where they remained talking, without ringing for either tea or candles, a full quarter of an hour.

Miss Hilary at last came out, but much to Elizabeth's surprise, went straight up into her bed-room, without entering the kitchen at all.

It was some minutes more before she descended; and then, after giving her orders for tea, and seeing that all was arranged with special neatness, she stood absently by the kitchen fire. Elizabeth noticed how wonderfully bright her eyes were, and what a soft happy smile she had. She noticed it, because she had never seen Miss Hilary look exactly like that before; and she never did again.

"Don't you be troubling yourself with

waiting about here," she said; and her mistress seemed to start at being spoken to. "I'll get the tea all right, Miss Hilary. Please go back into the parlour."

Hilary made no answer, but went in.

CHAPTER VI.

Elizabeth got tea ready with unwonted diligence, and considerable mental excitement. Any visitor was a rare occurrence in this very quiet family: but a gentleman visitor —a young gentleman too—was a remarkable fact, arousing both interest and curiosity. For in the latter quality this girl of seventeen could scarcely be expected to be deficient—and as to the former, she had so completely identified herself with the family she served, that all their concerns were her concerns also. Her acute comments on their few guests, and on their little scholars, sometimes amused Hilary as much as her criticisms on the books she read. But as neither were ever put forward intrusively or impertinently, she let them pass, and only laughed over them with Johanna in private.

In speaking of these said books, and the questions they led to, it was not likely but that mistress and maid—one aged twenty-two, and the other seventeen—should occasionally light upon a subject rather interesting to women of their ages, though not commonly discussed between mistresses and maids. Nevertheless, when it did come in the way, Miss Hilary never shirked it, but talked it out, frankly and freely, to Elizabeth as she would to any other person.

"The girl has feelings and notions on the matter, like all other girls, I suppose," reasoned she to herself: "so it is important that her notions should be kept clear, and her feelings right. It may do her some good, and save her from much harm."

And so it befell that Elizabeth Hand, whose blunt ways, unlovely person, and temperament so oddly nervous and reserved, kept her from attracting any "sweetheart" of her own class, had unconsciously imbibed her mistress's theory of love. Love, pure and simple, the very deepest and highest, sweetest and most solemn thing in life: to

be believed in devoutly until it came, and when it did come, to be held to, firmly, faithfully, with a single-minded, settled constancy, till death. A creed quite impossible, many will say, in this ordinary world, and most dangerous to be put into the head of a poor servant. Yet a woman is but a woman, be she maid-servant or queen; and if, from queens to maid-servants, girls were taught thus to think of love, there might be a few more "broken" hearts perhaps, but there would certainly be fewer wicked hearts; — far fewer corrupted lives of men, and degraded lives of women; far fewer unholy marriages, and desolated, dreary, homeless homes.

Elizabeth, having cleared away her tea-things, stood listening to the voices in the parlour, and pondering.

She had sometimes wondered in her own mind that no knight ever came to carry off her charming princess — her admired and beloved Miss Hilary. Miss Hilary, on her part, seemed totally indifferent to the youth at Stowbury; who indeed were, Elizabeth

allowed, quite unworthy her regard. The only suitable lover for her young mistress must be somebody exceedingly grand and noble—a compound of the best heroes of Shakspere, Scott, Fenimore Cooper, Maria Edgeworth, and Harriet Martineau. When this strange gentleman appeared—in ordinary coat and hat, or rather Glengarry bonnet, neither particularly handsome nor particularly tall; yet whose coming had evidently given Miss Hilary so much pleasure, and who, once or twice while waiting at tea, Elizabeth fancied she had seen looking at Miss Hilary as nobody ever looked before, —when Mr. Robert Lyon appeared on the scene, the faithful "bower-maiden" was a good deal disappointed.

She had expected somebody better; at all events, somebody different. Her first brilliant castle in the air fell, poor lass! but she quickly built it up again, and, with the vivid imagination of her age, she mapped out the whole future, ending by a vision of Miss Hilary, all in bridal white, sweeping down the Terrace in a carriage and pair—to for-

tune and happiness; leaving herself, though with a sore want at her heart, and a great longing to follow, to devote the remainder of her natural life to the service of Miss Johanna.

"Missis couldna do without somebody to see to her — and Miss Selina do worrit her so," muttered Elizabeth, in the excitement of this Alnaschar vision relapsing into her old provincialisms. "So, even if Miss Hilary axes me to come with her, I'll stop here, I reckon. Ay, I'll stop wi' poor Miss Leaf."

This valorous determination taken, the poor maid-servant's dream was broken by the opening of the parlour door, and an outcry of Ascott's for his coat and gloves, he having to fetch his aunts home at nine o'clock. And as they all stood together at the front-door, Elizabeth overheard Mr. Lyon say something about what a beautiful night it was.

"It would do you no harm, Miss Hilary; will you walk with us?"

"If you like."

Hilary went upstairs for her bonnet and

shawl; but when, a minute or two after, Elizabeth followed her with a candle, she found her standing in the centre of the room, all in the dark, her face white, and her hands trembling.

"Thank you, thank you!" she said, mechanically, as Elizabeth folded and fastened her shawl for her — and descended immediately. Elizabeth watched her take, not Ascott's arm, but Mr. Lyon's, and walk down the Terrace in the starlight.

"Some'at 's wrong. I 'd like to know who 's been a-vexin' of her," thought fiercely the young servant.

No, nobody had been "a-vexing" her mistress. There was nobody to blame; only there had happened to Hilary one of those things which strike like a sword through a young and happy heart, taking all the life and youth out of it.

Robert Lyon had, half-an-hour ago, told her — and she had had to hear it as a piece of simple news, to which she had only to say, "Indeed!"—that to-day and to-morrow were his two last days at Stowbury—almost

his last in England. Within a week he was to sail for India.

There had befallen him what most people would have considered a piece of rare good fortune. At the London University, a fellow-student, whom he had been gratuitously "coaching" in Hindostanee, fell ill, and was "thrown upon his hands," as he briefly defined services which must have been great, since they resulted in this end. The young man's father—a Liverpool and Bombay merchant—made him an offer to go out there, to their house, at a rising salary of 300 rupees a month for three years; after the third year to become a junior partner, remaining at Bombay in that capacity for two years more.

This he told to Hilary and Ascott in almost as few words as I have here put it — for brevity seemed a refuge to him, as it was also to Hilary. But Ascott asked so many questions that his aunt needed to ask none. She only listened, trying to take in this news, and understand it, that is, in a consecutive, intelligent, business shape,

without feeling it. She dared not let herself feel it, not for a second, till they were out, arm-in-arm, under the quiet winter stars. Then she heard his voice asking her-

"So you think I was right?"

"Right?" she echoed mechanically.

"I mean, in accepting this sudden offer and changing my whole plan of life. I did not do it—believe me—without a motive."

What motive? she would once unhesitatingly have asked—now she could not.

Robert Lyon continued speaking, distinctly and yet in an under-tone, which, though Ascott was walking a few yards off, Hilary felt was meant for her and her alone to hear.

"The change is, you perceive, from the life of a student to that of a man of business. I do not deny that I preferred the first. Once upon a time to be a Fellow in a college, or a Professor, or the like, was my utmost aim; and I would have half killed myself with study in order to attain it. Now — I think differently. I want, not learning or fame, but money."

He paused. If he required an answer, it did not come.

"I wish, not so much to be rich, as to get a decent competence, and to get it as soon as I can, without ruining my health more than I have already done by study."

"Have you been ill? You never said so."

"Oh, no, it was hardly worth while. And I knew an active life would soon set me right again. No fear! there's life in the old dog yet. He does not wish to die. But," Mr. Lyon pursued, "I have had a 'sair fecht' the last year—one which I would not go through again, or see any one dear to me go through it—not for worlds! It is over, but it has left its scars. Strange! I have been poor all my life, yet I never till now felt an actual terror of poverty."

Hilary shrank within herself, less even at the words than at something in their tone —something hard, nay fierce: something at once despairing and aggressive.

"It is strange," she said; "such a terror

is not like you. I feel none: I cannot even understand it."

"No, I knew you could not," he muttered; and was silent.

So was Hilary. A vague trouble came over her. Could it be that he, Robert Lyon, had been seized with the "auri sacra fames," which he had so often inveighed against and despised?—that his long struggle with poverty had caused in him such an overweening desire for riches, that to obtain them he would sacrifice everything else, exile himself to a far country for years, selling his very life for gold?

Such a thought of him was so terrible—that is, would have been, were it tenable—that Hilary for an instant felt herself shiver all over. The next she spoke out—in justice to him she forced herself to speak out—all her honest soul.

"I do believe that this going abroad to make a fortune, which young men so delight in, is often a most fatal mistake. They give up far more than they gain—country, home, health. I think a man has no right

to sell his life any more than his soul, for so many thousands a year."

Robert Lyon smiled—"No, and I am not selling mine. With my temperate habits I have as good a chance of health at Bombay as in London—perhaps better. And the years I must be absent I would have been absent almost as much from you—I mean, they would have been spent in work as engrossing and as hard. They will soon pass, and then I shall come home rich—rich—Do you think I am growing mercenary?"

"No."

"Tell me what you do think about me."

"I—cannot quite understand you."

"And I cannot make you understand—I ought not even to try. But I will, when I come back again. Till then you must trust me, Hilary."

It happens occasionally, in moments of all but intolerable pain, that some small thing, a word, a look, a touch of a hand, lets in such a gleam of peace, that nothing ever extinguishes the light of it: it burns on

for years and years, sometimes clear, sometimes obscured, but as ineffaceable from life and memory as a star from its place in the heavens. Such, both then and through the lonely years to come, were those five words, "You must trust me, Hilary."

She did; and in the perfectness of that trust, her own separate identity, with all its consciousness of pain, seemed annihilated: she did not think of herself at all, only of him, and with him, and for him. So for the time being she lost all sense of personal suffering, and their walk that night was as cheerful and happy as if they were to walk together, for weeks and months and years, in undivided confidence and content, instead of its being the last—the very last.

Some one has said that all lovers have soon or late to learn to be only friends: happiest and safest are those in whom the friendship is the foundation—always firm and ready to fall back upon, long after the fascination of passion dies. It may take a little from the romance of these two, if I own that Robert Lyon talked to Hilary not

a word about love, and a good deal about pure business; telling her all his affairs and arrangements, and giving her as clear an idea of his future life as it was possible to do within the limits of one brief half-hour.

Then casting a glance round, and seeing that Ascott was quite out of ear-shot, he said, with that tender fall of the voice that felt, as some poet hath it—

Like a still embrace—

"Now, tell me as much as you can about yourself."

At first there seemed nothing to tell; but gradually he drew from Hilary a good deal. Johanna's feeble health, which caused her continuing to teach to be very unadvisable; and the gradual diminishing of the school —from what cause they could not account —which made it very doubtful whether some change would not soon or late be necessary.

What this change should be, she and Mr. Lyon discussed a little; as far as in the

utterly indefinite position of affairs was possible. Also, from some other questions of his, she spoke to him about another dread which had lurked in her mind, and yet to which she could give no tangible shape—about Ascott. He could not remove it, he did not attempt; but he soothed it a little, advising with her as to the best way of managing the wilful lad. His strong clear sense, just judgment, and, above all, a certain unspoken sense of union, as if all that concerned her and hers he took naturally upon himself as his own, gave Hilary such comfort, that even on this night, with a full consciousness of all that was to follow, she was happy—nay, she had not been so happy for years. Perhaps (let the truth be told, the glorious truth of true love, that its recognition, spoken or silent, constitutes the only perfect joy of life, that of two made one), perhaps she had never been so really happy since she was born.

The last thing he did was to make her promise that he should be kept acquainted with all the concerns of the Leaf family,

and that in any and all difficulty she would apply to him.

"To me, and to no one else, remember. No one but myself must help you. And I will, so long as I am alive. Do you believe this?"

She looked up at him by the lamp-light, and said, "I do."

"And you promise?"

"Yes."

Then they loosed arms, and Hilary knew that they should never walk together again till—when and how?

Returning, of course he walked with Miss Leaf; and throughout the next day, a terribly wet Sunday, spent by them entirely in the little parlour, they had not a minute of special or private talk together. He did not seem to wish it—indeed almost avoided it.

Thus slipped away the strange, still day — a Sunday never to be forgotten. At night, after prayers were over, Mr. Lyon rose suddenly, saying he must leave them now; he was obliged to start from Stowbury at daybreak.

"Shall we not see you again?" asked Johanna.

"No. This will be my last Sunday in England. I wished to spend it here. Good-bye!"

He turned excessively pale, shook hands silently with them all—Hilary last—and almost before they recognised the fact, he was gone.

With him departed, not all Hilary's peace or faith or courage of heart, for to those who love truly, while the best-beloved lives, and lives worthily, no parting is hopeless and no grief overwhelming; but all the brightness of her youth, all the sense of joy that young people have in loving, and in being beloved again — in fond meetings and fonder partings, in endless walks and talks, in sweet kisses and clinging arms. Such happiness was not for her: when she saw it the lot of others, she said to herself, sometimes with a natural sharp sting of pain, but oftener with a solemn acquiescence — "It is the will of God; it is the will of God."

Johanna, too, who would have given her life almost to bring some colour back to the

white face of her darling, of whom she asked no questions, and who never complained nor confessed anything — many and many a night when Hilary either lay awake by her side, or tossed and moaned in her sleep, till the elder sister took her in her arms like a baby—Johanna, too, said to herself, "This is the will of God."

I have told thus much in detail the brief, sad story of Hilary's youth, to show how impossible it was that Elizabeth Hand could live in the house with these two women, without being strongly influenced by them as every person—especially every woman —influences, for good or for evil, every other person connected with her or dependent upon her.

Elizabeth was a girl of close observation and keen perception. Besides, to most people, whether or not their sympathy be universal, so far as the individual beloved is concerned, any deep affection generally lends eyes, tact, and delicacy.

Thus, when on the Monday morning at breakfast Miss Selina observed, what a fine day Mr. Lyon was having for his

journey; what a lucky fellow he was; how he would be sure to make a fortune, and if so, she wondered whether they should ever see or hear anything of him again—Elizabeth, from the glimpse she caught of Miss Hilary's face, and from the quiet way in which Miss Leaf merely answered, "Time will show," and began talking to Selina about some other subject, resolved never in any way to make the smallest allusion to Mr. Robert Lyon. Something had happened, she did not know what; and it was not her business to find out; the family affairs, so far as she was trusted with them, were warmly her own, but into the family secrets she had no right to pry.

Yet, long after Miss Selina had ceased to "wonder" about him, or even to name him—his presence or absence did not touch her personally, and she was always the centre of her own small world of interest—the little maid-servant kept in her mind, and pondered over at odd times, every possible solution of the mystery of this gentleman's sudden visit; of the long wet Sunday

when he sat all day talking with her mistresses in the parlour; of the evening prayer, when Miss Leaf had twice to stop, her voice faltered so; and of the night when, long after all the others had gone to bed, Elizabeth, coming suddenly into the parlour, had found Miss Hilary sitting alone over the embers of the fire, with the saddest, saddest look! so that the girl had softly shut the door again without speaking to her.

Elizabeth did more; which, strange as it may appear, a servant who knows, or is supposed to know, nothing of what has happened, can often do better than a member of the family, who knows everything—and this knowledge is sometimes the most irritating consciousness a sufferer has. She followed her young mistress with a steady daily watchfulness, so quiet and silent that Hilary never found it out—saved her every little household care, gave her every little household treat. Not much to do, and less to be chronicled; but the way in which she did it was all.

During the long dull winter days, to come in and find the parlour-fire always bright, the hearth clean swept, and the room tidy; never to enter the kitchen without the servant's face clearing up into a smile; when her restless irritability made her forget things, and grow quite vexed in the search after them, to see that somehow her shoes were never misplaced, and her gloves always came to hand in some mysterious manner—these trifles, in her first heavy days of darkness, soothed Hilary more than words could tell.

And the sight of Miss Hilary going about the house and school-room as usual, with that poor white face of hers; nay, gradually bringing to the family fireside, as usual, her harmless little joke, and her merry laugh at it and herself—who shall say what lessons may not have been taught by this to the humble servant, dropping deep-sown into her heart, to germinate and fructify as her future life's needs required?

It might have been so — God knows!

He alone can know, who, through what (to us) seem the infinite littlenesses of our mortal existence, is educating us into the infinite greatness of His and our immortality.

CHAPTER VII.

Autumn soon lapsed into winter; Christmas came and went, bringing, not Ascott, as they hoped and he had promised, but a very serious evil in the shape of sundry bills of his, which, he confessed in a most piteous letter to his aunt Hilary, were absolutely unpayable out of his godfather's allowance. They were not large; or would not have seemed so to rich people; and they were for no more blameable luxuries than horse-hire, and a dinner or two to friends out in the country: but they looked serious to a household which rarely was more than five pounds beforehand with the world.

He had begged Aunt Hilary to keep his secret—but that was evidently impossible; so on the day the school-accounts were being written out and sent in, and their

amount anxiously reckoned, she laid before her sisters the lad's letter, full of penitence and promises:—

"I will be careful—I will indeed—if you will help me this once, dear Aunt Hilary; and don't think too ill of me. I have done nothing wicked. And you don't know London—you don't know, with a lot of young fellows about one, how very hard it is to say No."

At that unlucky postscript, the Misses Leaf sorrowfully exchanged looks. Little the lad thought about it—but these few words were the very sharpest pang Ascott had ever given to his aunts.

"What's bred in the bone will come out in the flesh." "Like father like son." "The sins of the parents shall be visited on the children." So runs many a proverb; so confirms the unerring decree of a just God, who would not be a just God did He allow Himself to break His own righteous laws for the government of the universe; did He falsify the requirements of His own holy and pure being, by per-

mitting any other wages for sin than death. And though, through His mercy, sin forsaken escapes sin's penalty, and every human being has it in his power to modify, if not to conquer, any hereditary moral as well as physical disease, thereby avoiding the doom and alleviating the curse—still the original law remains in force, and ought to remain, an example and a warning. As true as that every individual sin which a man commits breeds multitudes more, is it that every individual sinner may transmit his own peculiar type of weakness or wickedness to a whole race, disappearing in one generation, reappearing in another, exactly the same as physical peculiarities do, requiring the utmost caution of education to counteract the terrible tendencies of nature—the "something in the blood" which is so difficult to eradicate; which may even make the third and fourth generations execrate the memory of him or her who was its origin.

The long life-curse of Henry Leaf the elder, and Henry Leaf the younger, had

been—the women of the family well knew—that they were men "who couldn't say No." So keenly were the three sisters alive to this fault—it could hardly be called a crime, and yet in its consequences it was so—so sickening the terror of it which their own wretched experience had implanted in their minds—that during Ascott's childhood and youth, his very fractiousness and roughness, his little selfishnesses, and his persistence in his own will against theirs, had been hailed by his aunts as a good omen that he would grow up "so unlike his poor father."

If the two unhappy Henry Leafs—father and son—could but have come out of their graves that night, and beheld these three women—their daughters and sisters—sitting with Ascott's letter on the table, planning how the household's small expenses could be contracted, its still smaller luxuries relinquished, in order that the boy might honourably pay for pleasures he might so easily have done without! If they could have seen the weight of apprehension which

then sank like a stone on these long-tried hearts, never to be afterwards quite removed, lightened sometimes, but always—however Ascott might promise and amend—always there! On such a discovery, surely, these two "poor ghosts" would have fled away moaning, wishing they had died childless, or that during their mortal lives any amount of self-restraint and self-compulsion had purged from their natures the accursed thing—the sin which had worked itself out in sorrow upon everyone belonging to them, years after their own heads were laid in the quiet dust.

"We must do it," was the conclusion the Misses Leaf unanimously came to—even Selina; who, with all her faults, had a fair share of good feeling and of that close clinging to kindred which is found in fallen households, or households whom the sacred bond of common poverty has drawn together in a way that large, well-to-do home circles can never quite understand. "We must not let the boy remain in debt; it would be such a disgrace to the family."

"It is not the remaining in debt, but the incurring of it, which is the real disgrace to Ascott and the family."

"Hush, Hilary," said Johanna, pointing to the opening door; but it was too late.

Elizabeth, coming suddenly in—or else the ladies had been so engrossed with their conversation that they had not noticed her, —had evidently heard every word of the last sentence. Her conscious face showed it; more especially the bright scarlet which covered both her cheeks when Miss Leaf said "Hush!" She stood apparently irresolute as to whether she should run away again; then her native honesty got the upper hand, and she advanced into the room.

"If you please, missis, I didn't mean to —but I've heard—"

"What have you heard—that is, how much?"

"Just what Miss Hilary said—about Master Ascott. Don't be afeard. I shan't tell. I never chatter about the family. Mother told me not."

"You owe a great deal, Elizabeth, to your good mother. Now go away."

"And another time," said Miss Selina, "knock at the door."

This was Elizabeth's first initiation into what many a servant has to share—the secret burden of the family. After that day, though they did not actually confide in her, her mistresses used no effort to conceal that they had cares; that the domestic economies must, this winter, be especially studied; there must be no extra fires, no candles left burning to waste; and, once a week or so, a few butterless breakfasts or meatless dinners must be partaken of cheerfully, in both parlour and kitchen. The Misses Leaf never stinted their servant in anything in which they did not stint themselves.

Strange to say, in spite of Miss Selina's prophecies, the girl's respectful conduct did not abate; on the contrary, it seemed to increase. The nearer she was lifted to her mistresses' level the more her mind grew, so that she could better understand her

mistresses' cares, and the deeper became her appreciation of the only thing which gives one human being any real authority over another—personal character.

Therefore, though the family means were narrowed, and the family luxuries few, Elizabeth cheerfully put up with all; she even felt a sort of pride in wasting nothing and in making the best of everything, as the others did. Perhaps it may be said she was an exceptional servant; and yet I would not do her class the wrong to believe so: I would rather believe that there are many such among it; many good, honest, faithful girls, who only need good mistresses unto whom to be honest and faithful, and they would be no less so than Elizabeth Hand.

The months went by—heavy and anxious months; for the school gradually dwindled away, and Ascott's letters—now almost the only connection his aunts had with the outer world, for poverty necessarily diminished even their small Stowbury society—became more and more unsatisfactory. Besides the want of information in them was not

supplied by those other letters which had once kept Johanna's heart easy concerning the boy.

Mr. Lyon had written once before sailing, nay, after sailing, for he had sent it home by the pilot from the English Channel: then there was, of course, silence. October, November, December, January, February, March—how often did Hilary count the months, and wonder how soon a letter could come—nay, sometimes pausing to drive away the doubt whether it ever would come. Now and then—the sharp present stinging her with its small daily pains, the future looking dark before her and them all—she felt so forlorn, so forsaken, that but for a certain tiny well-spring of hope, which rarely dries up till long after three-and-twenty, she could have sat down and sighed, "My good days are done."

Rich people break their hearts much sooner than poor people; that is, they more easily get into that morbid state which is glorified by the term, "a broken heart." Poor people cannot afford it. Their constant

labour "physics pain." Their few and narrow pleasures seldom pall. Holy poverty! black as its dark side is, it has its bright side too—that is, when it is honest, fearless, free from selfishness, wastefulness, and bickerings; above all, free from the terror of debt.

"We'll starve—we'll go into the workhouse rather than we'll go into debt!" cried Hilary once, in a passion of tears, when she was in sore want of a shawl, and Selina urged her to get it on credit, and wait till she could pay for it. "Yes—the workhouse! It would be less shame to be honourably indebted to the laws of the land than to be meanly indebted, under false pretences, to any individual in it."

And when, in payment for some accidental lessons, she received next month enough money to buy a shawl, and a bonnet too—nay, by great ingenuity, another bonnet for Johanna—Hilary could have danced and sung—sung, in the gladness and relief of her heart, the glorious euthanasia of poverty.

But these things happened only occasionally; the daily life was hard still, ay, very hard, even though at last came the letter from "foreign parts;" and following it, at regular intervals, other letters. They were full of facts rather than feelings—simple, straightforward; worth little as literary compositions; schoolmaster and learned man as he was, there was nothing literary or poetical about Mr. Lyon; but what he wrote was like what he spoke—the accurate reflection of his own clear original mind and honest tender heart.

His letters gave none the less comfort because, nominally, they were addressed to Johanna. This might have been from some crotchet of over-reserve, or delicacy, or honour—the same which made him part from her for years with no other words than, "You must trust me, Hilary;" but whatever it was, she respected it, and she did trust him. And whether Johanna answered his letters or not, month by month they unfailingly came, keeping her completely informed of all his proceedings, and letting

out, as epistles from over the seas often do, much more of himself and his character than he was probably aware he betrayed.

And Hilary, whose sole experience of mankind had been the scarcely remembered father, the too well remembered brother, and the anxiously watched nephew, thanked God that there seemed to be one man in the world whom a woman could lean her heart upon, and not feel the support break like a reed beneath her—one man whom she could entirely believe in, and safely and sacredly trust.

CHAPTER VIII.

Time slipped by. Robert Lyon had been away more than three years. But in the monotonous life of the sisters at Stowbury nothing was changed; except, perhaps, Elizabeth, who had grown quite a woman. She might almost have passed for thirty; so solidly old-fashioned were her figure and her manners.

Ascott Leaf had finished his walking the hospitals and his examinations, and was now fitted to commence practice for himself. His godfather had still continued his allowance; though once or twice, when he came down to Stowbury, the young man had asked his aunts to help him in some small debts —the last time in one a little more serious; when, after some sad and sore consultation, it had been resolved to tell him he must contrive to live within his own means. For

they were poorer than they used to be; many more schools had arisen in the town, and theirs had dwindled away. It was becoming a source of serious anxiety whether they could possibly make ends meet; and when, the next Christmas, Ascott sent them a five-pound note—an actual five-pound note, together with a fond grateful letter that was worth it all—the aunts were deeply thankful, and very happy.

But still the school declined. One night they were speculating upon the causes of this, and Hilary was declaring, in a half-jocular, half-earnest way, that it must be because a prophet is never a prophet in his own country.

"The Stowbury people will never believe how clever I am. Only, it is a useless sort of cleverness, I fear. My Greek, Latin, and mathematics are of little use to infants under seven, such as Stowbury persists in sending to us."

"They think I am only fit to teach little children—and perhaps it is true," said Miss Leaf, meekly.

"I wish you had not to teach at all. I wish I were a daily governess—I might be, and earn enough to keep the whole family; only, it could not be at Stowbury."

"I wonder," said Johanna, thoughtfully, "if we shall have to make a change."

"A change!" It almost pained the elder sister to see how the younger brightened up at the word. "Where?—to London? Oh, I have so longed to go and live in London! But I thought you would not like it, Johanna."

That was true. Miss Leaf, whom feeble health had made prematurely old, would willingly have ended her days in the familiar town; but Hilary was young and strong. Johanna called to mind the days when she, too, had felt that rest was only another name for dulness; when the most difficult thing possible was what seemed now so easy—to sit down and endure.

Besides, unlike herself, Hilary had her life all before her. It might be a happy life, safe in a good man's tender keeping: those unfailing letters from India seemed

to prophesy that it would. But no one could say. Miss Leaf's own experience had not led her to place much faith in either men or happiness.

Still, however Hilary's future might turn out, it would likely be a very different one from that quiet colourless life of hers. And as she looked at her young sister, with the twilight glow on her face—they were taking an evening stroll up and down the terrace—Johanna hoped and prayed it might be so. Her own lot seemed easy enough for herself; but for Hilary—she would like to see Hilary something better than a poor schoolmistress at Stowbury.

No more was said at that time, but Johanna had the deep, still, Mary-like nature, which "kept" things, and "pondered them in her heart;" so that when the subject was revived again, she was able to meet it with the sweet calmness which was her especial characteristic—the unruffled peace of a soul that no worldly storms could disturb overmuch, for it had long since cast anchor in the world unseen.

The circumstances which brought up again the question of the Great Metropolitan Hegira, as Hilary called it, was a letter from Mr. Ascott, as follows:—

"MISS LEAF.

"MADAM,—I shall be obliged by your informing me if it is your wish, as it seems to be your nephew's, that, instead of returning to Stowbury, he should settle in London as a surgeon and general practitioner.

"His education complete, I consider that I have done my duty by him; but I may assist him occasionally still, unless he turns out—as his father did before him—a young man who prefers being helped to helping himself; in which case I shall have nothing more to do with him.

I remain, Madam, your obedient servant,

"PETER ASCOTT."

The sisters read this letter, passing it round the table, none of them apparently liking to be the first to comment upon it. At length Hilary said—

"I think that reference to poor Henry is perfectly brutal."

"And yet he was very kind to Henry. And if it had not been for his common sense in at once sending poor little Ascott and the nurse down to Stowbury, the baby might have died. But you don't remember anything of that sorrowful time, my dear," said Johanna, sighing.

"He has been kind enough, though he has done it in such a patronising way," observed Selina. "I suppose that 's the real reason of his doing it. He thinks it fine to patronise us, and show kindness to our family; he, the stout bullet-headed grocer's boy, who used to sit and stare at us all church-time."

"At you, you mean. Wasn't he called your admirer?" said Hilary, mischievously; upon which Selina drew herself up in great indignation.

And then they fell to talking of that anxious question—Ascott's future. A little they reproached themselves that they had left the lad so long in London—so

long out of their own fond influence, which might have counteracted the evil sharply hinted in his godfather's letter. But, once away, to lure him back to their poor home was impossible.

"Suppose we were to go to him," suggested Hilary.

The poor and friendless possess one great advantage—they have nobody to ask advice of—nobody to whom it matters much what they do or where they go. The family mind has but to make itself up, and act accordingly. Thus within an hour or two of the receipt of Mr. Ascott's letter, Hilary went into the kitchen, and told Elizabeth that, as soon as her work was done, Miss Leaf wished to have a little talk with her.

"Eh! what 's wrong? Has Miss Selina been a-grumbling at me?"

Elizabeth was in one of her bad humours, which, though of course they never ought to have, servants do have as well as their superiors. Hilary perceived this, by the way she threw the coals on and tossed the chairs about. But to-day her heart was

full of far more serious cares than Elizabeth's ill-temper. She replied composedly—

"I have not heard that either of my sisters is displeased with you. What they want to talk to you about is for your own good. We are thinking of making a great change. We intend leaving Stowbury, and going to live in London."

"Going to live in London!"

Now, quick as her tact and observation were—her heart taught her these things—Elizabeth's head was a thorough Saxon head, slow to receive impressions. It was a family saying, that nothing was so hard as to put a new idea into Elizabeth, except to get it out again.

For this reason Hilary preferred paving the way quietly, before startling her with the sudden intelligence of their contemplated change.

"Well, what do you say to the plan?" asked she, good-humouredly.

"I dunnot like it at all," was the brief gruff answer of Elizabeth Hand.

Now it was one of Miss Hilary's doctrines,

that no human being is good for much unless he or she has what is called "a will of one's own." Perhaps this, like many another creed, was with her the result of circumstances. But she held it firmly. With that exaggerated one-sidedness of feeling which any bitter family or personal experience is sure to leave behind, a strong will was the quality that first attracted her in everybody. It had been so in the case of Robert Lyon: and likewise in Elizabeth's.

But this virtue has its inconveniences. When the maid began sweeping up her hearth with a noisy angry gesture, the mistress did the wisest and most dignified thing a mistress could do under the circumstances, and which she knew was the sharpest rebuke she could administer to the sensitive Elizabeth—she immediately quitted the kitchen.

For an hour after the parlour bell did not ring; and though it was washing-day, no Miss Hilary appeared to assist, as usual, in folding up the clothes. Elizabeth, subdued and wretched, waited till she could wait no

longer; then knocked at the door, and asked humbly "if she should bring in supper?"

The extreme kindness of the answer—"Come in; we wanted to speak to you," crushed the lingering fragments of ill-humour out of the girl.

"Miss Hilary has told you our future plans, Elizabeth; now we wish to have a little talk with you about yours."

"Eh?"

Miss Leaf continued. "We conclude you will not wish to go with us to London; and it would be hardly advisable you should. You can get higher wages now than any we can afford to give you; indeed, we have more than once thought of telling you so, and offering you your choice of trying for a better place."

"You're very kind," was the answer, stolid rather than grateful.

"No; I think we are merely honest. We should never think of keeping a girl upon lower wages than she was worth. Hitherto, however, the arrangement has been quite fair — you know, Elizabeth, you have given

us a deal of trouble in the teaching of you." And Miss Leaf smiled, half sadly, as if this, the first of the coming changes, hurt her more than she liked to express. "Come, my girl," she added, "you needn't look so serious. We are not in the least vexed with you; we shall be very sorry to lose you; and we will give you the best of characters when you leave."

"I dunnot—mean—to leave at all."

Elizabeth threw out the words like pellets, in a choked fashion, and disappeared suddenly from the parlour.

"Who would have thought it!" exclaimed Selina; "I declare the girl was crying."

No mistake about that; though when, a few minutes after, Miss Hilary entered the kitchen, Elizabeth tried in a hurried shamefaced way to hide her tears by being very busy over something. Her mistress took no notice, but began, as usual on washing-days, to assist in various domestic matters, in the midst of which she said quietly—

"And so, Elizabeth, you would really like to go to London?"

"No; I shouldn't like it at all; I never said I should. But if you go, I shall go too; though missis seems so ready to get shut o' me."

"It was for your own good, you know."

"You always said it was for a girl's good to stop in one place; and if you think I am going to another—I aren't, that 's all."

Rude as the form of the speech was—almost the first rude speech that Elizabeth had ever made to Miss Hilary, and which under other circumstances she would have felt bound severely to reprove—the mistress passed it over. That which lurked beneath it, the sharpness of wounded love, touched her heart. She felt that, in spite of the girl's rough manner, it would have been hard to go into her London kitchen and meet a strange London face, instead of that fond homely one of Elizabeth's.

Still, she thought it right to explain to her that London life might have many difficulties, that, for the present at least, her wages could not be raised, and the family might at first be in even more

straitened circumstances than they were at Stowbury.

"Only at first, though, for I hope to find plenty of pupils. And soon, we trust, our nephew will get into practice."

"Is it on account of him you 're going, Miss Hilary?"

"Chiefly."

Elizabeth gave a grunt, which said as plainly as words could say, "I thought so," and relapsed into what she, no doubt, believed to be virtuous indignation, but which, as it was testified against the wrong parties, was open to the less favourable interpretation of ill-humour—a small injustice not uncommon with us all.

I do not pretend to paint this young woman as a perfect character. She had her fierce dislikes, as well as her strong fidelities; her faults within and without, which had to be struggled with—as all of us have to struggle to the very end of our days. Oftentimes not till the battle is nigh over—sometimes not till it is quite over—does God give us the victory.

Without more discussion on either side, it was agreed that Elizabeth should accompany her mistresses. Even Mrs. Hand seemed to be pleased thereat, her only doubt being lest her daughter should meet and be led astray by that bad woman, Mrs. Cliffe, Tommy Cliffe's mother, who was reported to have gone to London. But Miss Hilary explained that this meeting was about as probable as the rencontre of two needles in a hay-rick; and, besides, Elizabeth was not the sort of girl to be easily "led astray" by anybody.

"No, no; her 's a good wench, though I says it," replied the mother, who was too hard worked to have much sentiment to spare. "I wish the little uns may take pattern by our Elizabeth. You 'll send her home, maybe, in two or three years' time, to let us have a look at her?"

Miss Hilary promised, and then took her way back through the familiar old town—so soon to be familiar no more—thinking anxiously, in spite of herself, upon those two or three years, and what they might bring.

It happened to be a notable day—that sunshiny 28th of June when the little round-cheeked damsel, who is a grandmother now, had the crown of three kingdoms first set upon her youthful head; and when Stowbury, like every other town in the land, was a perfect bower of green arches, garlands, banners; poor men dined, or poor women drank tea, at white-covered tables, which were spread in the open air, down almost every street. Everybody was out and abroad, looking at or sharing in the holiday-making, wild with merriment, and brimming over with passionate loyalty to the maiden Queen.

That day is now twenty-four years ago; but all those who remember it must own there never was a day like it, when, all over the country, every man's heart throbbed with chivalrous devotion, every woman's heart thrilled with womanly tenderness, towards this one royal girl, who —God bless her!—has lived to retain and deserve it all.

Hilary called for, and protected through

the crowd, the little timid widow lady who had taken off the Misses Leaf's hands their house and furniture, and whom they had made very happy—as the poor often can make those still poorer than themselves—by refusing to accept anything for the "good-will" of the school. Then she was fetched by Elizabeth, who had been given a whole afternoon's holiday; and mistress and maid went together home, watching the last of the festivities, the chattering groups that still lingered in the twilight streets; and listening to the merry notes of the "Triumph," which came down through the lighted windows of the Town Hall, where the open-air tea-drinkers had adjourned to dance country dances, by civic permission, and in perfectly respectable jollity.

"I wonder," said Hilary—while, despite some natural regret, her spirit stretched itself out eagerly from the narrowness of the place where she was born into the great wide world; the world where so many grand things were thought and written

and done; the world where Robert Lyon had so long fought, and was fighting bravely still—"I wonder, Elizabeth, what sort of place London is, and what our life will be in it?"

Elizabeth said nothing. For the moment her face seemed to catch the reflected glow of her mistress's, and then it settled down into that look of mingled resistance and resolution which was habitual to her. For the life that was to be, which neither knew —oh, if they had known!—she also was prepared.

CHAPTER IX.

The day of the Grand Hegira came.

"I remember," said Miss Leaf, as they rumbled for the last time through the empty morning streets of poor old Stowbury, "I remember my grandmother telling me that when my grandfather was courting her, and she out of coquetry refused him, he set off on horseback to London, and she was so wretched to think of all the dangers he ran on the journey, and in London itself, that she never rested till she got him back, and then immediately married him."

"No such catastrophe as matrimony is likely to happen to any of us, except perhaps to Elizabeth," said Miss Hilary, trying to get up a little feeble mirth, just to pass away the time and lessen the pain of parting, which was almost too much for

Johanna. "What do you say? Do you mean to get married in London, Elizabeth?"

But Elizabeth could make no answer, even to kind Miss Hilary. They had not imagined she would have felt the leaving her native place so much. She had watched intently the last glimpse of Stowbury church tower, and now sat staring blankly, silent and stony, out of the carriage window. Once or twice a large, slow tear gathered in each of her eyes, but it was shaken off angrily from the high cheek-bones, and never settled into absolute crying. They thought it best to take no notice of her. Only, when reaching the new small station, where the "resonant steam eagles" were, for the first time, beheld by these innocent Stowbury ladies, there arose a discussion as to the manner of travelling—Miss Leaf said decidedly—"We will go second-class—for then we can keep Elizabeth with us." Upon which Elizabeth's mouth melted into something between a quiver and a smile.

Soon the departure was all over, and

the little family was compressed into the humble second-class carriage, cheerless and cushionless, whirling through indefinite England in a way that confounded all their geography and topography. Gradually, as the day darkened into heavy, chilly July rain, the carefully kept-up spirits of the four passengers began to sink. Johanna grew very white and worn, Selina became, to use Ascott's phrase, "as cross as two sticks," and even Hilary, turning her eyes from the grey, sodden-looking landscape without, could find no spot of comfort to rest on within the carriage, except that round rosy face of Elizabeth Hand's.

Whether it was from the mere spirit of contradiction existing in characters like hers, which, especially in youth, are more strong than sweet, or from a higher and better feeling, still, the fact was noticeable, that when everyone else's spirits went down, Elizabeth's went up. Nothing could bring her out of a "grumpy" fit so satisfactorily as some other persons' falling into one. When Miss Selina now began to

fidget hither and thither, each tone of her fretful voice seeming to go through her elder sister's every nerve, till even Hilary said, impatiently, "Oh, Selina, can't you be quiet?" then Elizabeth rose from her depth of gloomy discontent up to the surface immediately.

She was only a servant; but Nature bestows that strange, vague thing that we term "force of character" independently of position. Hilary often remembered afterwards how much more comfortable the end of the journey was than she had expected; how Johanna lay at ease, with her feet on Elizabeth's lap, wrapped in Elizabeth's best woollen shawl; and how, when Selina's whole attention was turned to an ingenious contrivance with a towel and fork, which stopped the rain from dropping through the carriage-roof—she became far less disagreeable, and even a little proud of her own cleverness. And so there was a temporary lull in Hilary's cares, and she could sit quiet, with her eyes fixed on the rainy landscape, which she did not

see, and her thoughts wandering towards that unknown place and unknown life into which they were sweeping, as we all sweep, ignorantly, unresistingly, almost unconsciously, into new destinies. Hilary, for the first time, began to doubt of theirs. Anxious as she had been to go to London, and wise as the proceeding appeared, now that the die was cast and the cable cut, the old simple, peaceful life at Stowbury grew strangely dear.

"I wonder if we shall ever go back again, or what is to happen to us before we do go back," she thought, and turned, with a half-defined fear, towards her eldest sister, who looked so old and fragile beside that sturdy, healthy servant-girl—"Elizabeth!" and Elizabeth, rubbing Miss Leaf's feet, started at the unwonted sharpness of Miss Hilary's tone—"there; I'll do that for my sister. Go and look out of the window at London."

For the great smoky cloud which began to rise in the rainy horizon was indeed London. Soon, through the thickening

nebula of houses, they converged to what was then the nucleus of all railway travelling, the Euston Terminus, and were hustled on to the platform, and jostled helplessly to and fro—these poor country ladies! Anxiously they scanned the crowd of strange faces for the one only face they knew in the great metropolis —which did not appear.

"It is very strange—very wrong of Ascott. Hilary, you surely told him the hour correctly? For once, at least, he might have been in time."

So chafed Miss Selina, while Elizabeth, who, by some miraculous effort of intuitive genius, had succeeded in collecting the luggage, was now engaged in defending it from all comers, especially porters, and making of it a comfortable seat for Miss Leaf.

"Nay, have patience, Selina. We will give him just five minutes more," said Hilary.

And Johanna sat down, with her sweet, calm, long-suffering face turned upwards to that younger one, which was, as youth is apt to be, hot, and worried, and angry. And

so they waited till the terminus was almost deserted, and the last cab had driven off, when, suddenly, dashing up the station-yard out of another, came Ascott.

He was so sorry, so very sorry, downright grieved, at having kept his aunts waiting. But his watch was wrong—some fellows at dinner detained him—the train was before its time, surely. In fact, his aunts never quite made out what the excuse was; but they looked into his bright, handsome face, and their wrath melted like clouds before the sun. He was so gentlemanly, so well-dressed—much better dressed than even at Stowbury—and he seemed so unfeignedly glad to see them. He handed them all into the cab—even Elizabeth, though whispering meanwhile to his aunt Hilary, "What on earth did you bring her for?"—and then was just going to leap on to the box himself, when he stopped to ask "Where he should tell cabby to drive to?"

"Where to?" repeated his aunts in undisguised astonishment. They had never

thought of anything but of being taken home at once by their boy.

"I thought I had explained"—Ascott said confusedly—"at least, I meant to explain when I met you, that I couldn't well take you in to-night. You would not be comfortable. A young fellow's lodgings are not like a house of one's own, and, besides——"

"Besides, when a young fellow is ashamed of his old aunts, he can easily find reasons."

"Hush, Selina," interposed Miss Leaf. "My dear boy, your old aunts would never let you inconvenience yourself for them. Take us to an inn for the night, and to-morrow we will find lodgings for ourselves."

Ascott looked greatly relieved.

"And you are not vexed with me, Aunt Johanna?" said he, with something of his old childish tone of compunction, as he saw—he could not help seeing—the utter weariness which Johanna tried so hard to hide.

"No, my dear, not vexed. Only I wish you had told us this a little sooner, that

we might have made other arrangements. Now, where shall we go?"

Ascott mentioned a dozen hotels, but they found he only knew them by name. At last Miss Leaf remembered one, which her father used to go to on his frequent journeys to London, and whence, indeed, he had been brought home to die. And though all the recollections about it were sad enough, still it felt less strange than the rest, in this dreariness of London. So she proposed going to the "Old Bell," Holborn.

"A capital place!" exclaimed Ascott, eagerly. "And I'll take and settle you there; and we'll order supper and make a jolly night of it. All right. Drive on, cabby!"

He jumped on the box, and then peered in mischievously, flourishing his lit cigar, and shaking his long hair—his aunt Selina's two great abominations—right in her indignant face: but withal looking so merry and good-tempered, that she shortly softened into a smile.

"How handsome the boy is growing!"

"Yes," said Johanna, with a slight sigh;

"and, did you notice? how exceedingly like his ——"

The sentence was left unfinished. Alas! if every young man, who believes his faults and follies injure himself alone, could feel what it must be, years afterwards, to have his nearest kindred shrink from saying, as the saddest, most ominous thing they could say of his son, that the lad is growing "so like his father!"

It might have been—they assured each other that it was—only the incessant roll, roll of the street sounds below their windows which kept the Misses Leaf awake half the night of this their first night in London. And when they sat down to breakfast—having waited an hour vainly for their nephew—it might have been only the gloom of the little parlour which cast a slight shadow over them all. Still, the shadow was there.

It deepened, despite the sunshiny morning into which the last night's rain had brightened, till Holborn Bars looked cheerful, and Holborn pavement actually clean,

so that, as Elizabeth said, "you might eat your dinner off it," which was the one only thing she condescended to approve of in London. She had sat all evening mute in her corner, for Miss Leaf would not send her away into the *terra incognita* of a London hotel. Ascott, at first considerably annoyed at the presence of what he called a "skeleton at the feast," had afterwards grown good-humoured, and run on with a mixture of childish glee and mannish pomposity about his plans and intentions —how he meant to take a house, he thought, in one of the squares, or a street leading out of them; how he would put up the biggest of brass plates, with "Mr. Leaf, Surgeon," and soon get an extensive practice, and have all his aunts to live with him. And his aunts had smiled and listened, forgetting all about the silent figure in the corner, who perhaps had gone to sleep, or had also listened, until the time came for her to go to bed.

"Elizabeth, come and look out at London."

So, after breakfast, she and Miss Hilary

whiled away another heavy three-quarters of an hour in watching and commenting on the incessantly shifting crowd which swept past Holborn Bars. Miss Selina sometimes looked out too, but more often sat fidgeting and wondering why Ascott did not come; while Miss Leaf, who never fidgeted, became gradually more and more silent. Her eyes were fixed on the door, with an expression which, if Hilary could have remembereed so far back, would have been to her something, not painfully new, but still more painfully old—a look branded into her face by many an hour's anxious listening for the footstep that never came, or only came to bring distress. It was the ineffaceable token of that long, long struggle between affection and conscience, pity and scarcely repressible contempt, which, for more than one generation, had been the appointed burden of this family—at least, the women of it—till sometimes it seemed to hang over them like a fate.

About noon, Miss Leaf proposed calling for the hotel bill. Its length so alarmed

the country ladies, that Hilary suggested not staying to dine, but going immediately in search of lodgings.

"What, without a gentleman! Impossible! I always understood that ladies could go nowhere in London without a gentleman!"

"We shall come very ill off, then, Selina. But anyhow, I mean to try. You know the region where, we have heard, lodgings are cheapest and best—that is, best for us. It cannot be far from here. Suppose I start at once?"

"What, alone?" cried Johanna, anxiously.

"No, dear. I'll take the map with me, and Elizabeth. She is not afraid."

Elizabeth smiled, and rose, with that air of dogged devotedness with which she would have prepared to follow Miss Hilary to the North Pole, if necessary. So, after a few minutes of arguing with Selina, who did not press her point overmuch, since it was not herself who had to commit the impropriety of the expedition; after a few minutes more of hopeless lingering about—till even Miss Leaf said they had

better wait no longer—mistress and maid took a farewell of the two others, nearly as pathetic as if they had been in reality Arctic voyagers, and plunged into the dusty glare and hurrying crowd of the "sunny side" of Holborn in July.

A strange sensation, and yet there was something exhilarating in it. The intense solitude that there is in a London street, these country girls—for Miss Hilary herself was no more than a girl—could not as yet realise. They only felt the life of it; stirring, active, incessantly moving life—even though it was of a kind that they knew as little of as the crowd did of them. Nothing struck Hilary more than the self-absorbed look of passers-by; each so busy on his own affairs, that, in spite of Selina's alarm, they were as little noticed as if they had been walking among the cows and horses in Stowbury field.

Poor old Stowbury! They felt how far away they were from it, when a ragged, dirty, vicious-looking girl offered them a moss rose-bud for "one penny, only one

penny," which Elizabeth, lagging behind, bought, and found it only a broken-off bud stuck on to a bit of wire.

"That 's London ways, I suppose," said she, severely, and became so misanthropic that she would hardly vouchsafe a glance to the handsome square into which they turned, and merely observed of the tall houses, taller than any Hilary had ever seen, that she "wouldn't fancy running up and down them stairs."

But Hilary was cheerful in spite of all. She was glad to be in this region—glad to find herself in the body, where in the spirit she had come so many a time. The mere consciousness of being there seemed to refresh her. She felt sure she would be much happier living in London; that in the long years to come that must be borne, it would be good for her to have something to do as well as to hope for; something to fight with as well as to endure. Now more than ever came pulsing in and out of her memory a line once repeated by Robert Lyon in her hearing, with

an observation of how "true" it was. And though originally it was applied by a man to a woman, and she smiled sometimes to think how "unfeminine" some people — Selina, for instance—would consider her turning it the other way; still she did so. She believed that, for woman as for man, that is the purest and noblest love which is the most self-existent, most independent of love returned, and which can say, each to the other, equally on both sides, that the whole solemn purpose of life is, under God's service,

> If not to win, to feel more worthy thee.

Such thoughts made her step firmer and her heart lighter, so that she hardly noticed the distance they must have walked, till the close London air began to oppress her, and the smooth, glaring London pavements made her Stowbury feet ache sorely.

"Are you tired, Elizabeth? Well, we 'll rest soon. There must be lodgings near here. Only I can't quite make out —"

As Miss Hilary looked up to the name of

the street, the maid noticed what a glow came into her mistress's face, pale and tired as it was. Just then a church clock struck the quarter-hour.

"That must be St. Pancras. And this —yes, this is certainly Burton Street, Burton Crescent."

"I'm sure missus wouldn't like to live there," observed Elizabeth, eyeing uneasily the gloomy *rez-de-chaussée*, familiar to many a generation of struggling respectability, where, in the decadence of the season, every second house bore the announcement, "Apartments furnished."

"No," Miss Hilary replied, absently. Yet she continued to walk up and down, the whole length of the street; then passed out into the dreary, deserted-looking Crescent, where the trees were already beginning to fade; not, however, into the bright autumn tint of country woods, but into a premature withering, ugly and sad to behold.

"I am glad he is not here—right glad!" thought Hilary, as she realised the unutter-

able dreariness of those years when Robert Lyon lived and studied in his garret from month's end to month's end—these few dusty trees being his sole memento of the pleasant country in which he had been brought up, and which she knew he so passionately loved. Now, she could understand that "calenture" which he had sometimes jestingly alluded to as coming upon him at times, when he felt literally sick for the sight of a green field or a hedge full of birds. She wondered whether the same feeling would ever come upon her, in this strange desert of London, the vastness of which grew upon her every hour.

She was glad he was away; yes, heart-glad! And yet, if, this minute, she could only have seen him coming round the Crescent, have met his smile, and the firm, warm clasp of his hand—

For an instant there rose up in her one of those wild rebellious outcries against fate, when to have to waste years of this brief life of ours in the sort of semi-existence that living is, apart from the treasure

of the heart and the delight of the eyes, seems so cruelly, cruelly hard!

"Miss Hilary?"

She started, and "put herself under lock and key" immediately.

"Miss Hilary; you do look so tired!"

"Do I? Then we will go and sit down in this baker's shop, and get rested and fed. We cannot afford to wear ourselves out, you know. We have a great deal to do to-day."

More, indeed, than she calculated, for they walked up one street and down another, investigating at least twenty lodgings before any appeared which seemed fit for them. Yet some place must be found where Johanna's poor tired head could rest that night. At last, completely exhausted, with that oppressive exhaustion which seems to crush mind as well as body after a day's wandering in London, Hilary's courage began to ebb. Oh, for an arm to lean on; a voice to listen for, a brave heart to come to her side, saying, "Do not be afraid, there are two of us!" And she

yearned, with an absolutely sick yearning, such as only a woman who now and then feels the utter helplessness of her womanhood can know, for the only arm she cared to lean on, the only voice dear enough to bring her comfort, the only heart that she felt she could trust.

Poor Hilary! And yet why pity her? To her three alternatives could but happen: were Robert Lyon true to her, she would be his, entirely and devotedly, to the end of her days; did he forsake her, she would forgive him; should he die, she would be faithful to him eternally. Love of this kind may know anguish, but not the sort of anguish that lesser and weaker loves do. If it is certain of nothing else, it can always be certain of itself.

> Its will is strong:
> It suffers; but it cannot suffer long.

And even in its utmost pangs is an underlying peace which often approaches to absolute joy.

Hilary roused herself, and bent her mind

steadily on lodgings till she discovered one, from the parlour of which you could see the trees of Burton Crescent, and hear the sound of St. Pancras clock.

"I think we may do here—at least for a while," said she cheerfully; and then Elizabeth heard her inquiring if an extra bedroom could be had if necessary.

There was only one small attic. "Ascott never could put up with that," said Hilary, half to herself. Then suddenly—"I think I will go and see Ascott before I decide. Elizabeth, will you go with me or remain here?"

"I 'll go with you, if you please, Miss Hilary." ("If *you* please," sounded not unlike "if *I* please," and Elizabeth had gloomed over a little.) "Is Mr. Ascott to live with us?" asked she, after a pause.

"I suppose so."

No more words were interchanged till they reached Gower Street, when Miss Hilary observed, with evident surprise, what a handsome street it was.

"I must have made some mistake. He

never can be lodging here. Still we will find out the number he mentioned, and inquire."

No, there was no mistake. Mr. Ascott Leaf had lodged there for three months, but had given up his rooms that very morning.

"Where had he gone to?"

The servant—a London lodging-house servant all over—didn't know; but she fetched the landlady, who was after the same pattern as the dozen London landladies with whom Hilary had that day made acquaintance, only a little more Cockney, smirking, dirty, and tawdrily fine.

"Yes, Mr. Leaf had gone, and he hadn't left no address. Young college gentlemen often found it convenient to leave no address. P'raps he would, if he 'd known there would be a young lady to see him."

"I am Mr. Leaf's aunt," said Hilary, turning as hot as fire.

"Oh, in-deed," was the answer, with civil incredulousness.

But the woman was sharp of perception —as often cheated London landladies learn to be. After looking keenly at mistress and maid—especially at the latter, who looked so intensely, solidly "respectable," she changed her tone; nay, even launched out into praises of her late lodger: what a pleasant gentleman he was, what good company he kept, and how he had promised to recommend her apartments to his friends.

"And as for the little some'at of rent, Miss—tell him it makes no matter, he can pay me when he likes. If he don't call soon, p'raps I might make bold to send his trunk and his books over to Mr. Ascott's of —dear me, I forget the number and the square—

Hilary, unsuspiciously, supplied both.

"Yes, that's it—the old gen'leman as Mr. Leaf went to dine with every other Sunday; a very rich old gentleman, who, he says, is to leave him all his money. Maybe a relation of yours, Miss?"

"No," said Hilary; and adding some-

thing about the landlady's hearing from Mr. Leaf very soon, she hurried out of the house, Elizabeth following.

"Won't you be tired if you walk so fast, Miss Hilary?"

Hilary stopped, choking. Helplessly she looked up and down the forlorn, wide, glaring, dusty street; now sinking into the dull shadow of a London afternoon.

"Let us go home!" And at the word a sob burst out—just one passionate, pent-up sob. No more. She could not afford to waste her strength in crying.

"As you say, Elizabeth, I am getting tired; and that will not do. Let me consider; something must be decided." And she stood still, passing her hand over her hot brow and eyes. "I will go back and take the lodgings, leave you there to make all comfortable, and then fetch my sisters from the hotel. But stay—first, I have forgotten something."

She returned to the house in Gower Street, and wrote on one of her cards an address—the only permanent address she

could think of—that of the City broker who was in the habit of paying them their yearly income of £50.

"If any creditors inquire for Mr. Leaf, give them this, where they can always write, and it will find him. His friends may hear of him at the London University."

"Thank you, ma'am," replied the now civil landlady. "Indeed, I wasn't afraid of the young gentleman giving us the slip. For though he was careless in his bills, he was every inch the gentleman. And I wouldn't object to take him in again. Or p'raps you yourself, ma'am, might be a-wanting rooms."

"No, I thank you. Good morning." And Hilary hurried away.

Not a word did she say to Elizabeth, or Elizabeth to her, till they got into the dull, dingy parlour—henceforth to be their sole apology for "home:" and then she only talked about domestic arrangements: talked fast and eagerly, trying to escape the affectionate eyes which she knew were also sharp and keen. Only to escape them—

not to blind them, even if she herself had not been too honest to do it; she had long ago found out that Elizabeth was too quick-witted to be deceived in anything that concerned "the family." She felt convinced the girl had heard and comprehended every syllable that passed at Ascott's lodgings; that she knew all that was to be known, and guessed what was to be feared, as well as her mistress.

"Elizabeth" — she said at last, though she hesitated long before she did say it — "remember we are all strangers in London, and family matters are best kept within the family. Do not mention either in writing home, or to anybody hereabout— about—"

She could not name Ascott; she felt so horribly ashamed.

CHAPTER X.

Living in lodgings, not temporarily, but permanently, sitting down to make one's only "home" in Mrs. Jones's parlour or Mrs. Smith's first-floor, of which not a stick or a stone that one looks at is one's own, and whence one may be evicted or evade, with a week's notice or a week's rent, any day—this sort of life is natural and even delightful to some people. There are those who, like strawberry-plants, are of such an errant disposition, that, grow them where you will, they will soon absorb all the pleasantness of their habitat, and begin casting out runners elsewhere; nay, if not frequently transplanted, would actually wither and die. Of such are the pioneers of society —the emigrants, the tourists, the travellers round the world; and great is the advan-

tage the world derives from them, active, energetic, and impulsive as they are—unless, indeed, their talent for incessant locomotion degenerates into rootless restlessness, and they remain for ever rolling stones, gathering no moss, and acquiring gradually a smooth, hard surface, which adheres to nothing, and to which nobody dare venture to adhere.

But there are others possessing in a painful degree this sad quality of adhesiveness, to whom the smallest change is obnoxious; who like drinking out of a particular cup, and sitting in a particular chair; to whom even a variation in the position of furniture is unpleasant. Of course, this peculiarity has its bad side, and yet it is not in itself mean or ignoble. For is not adhesiveness, faithfulness, constancy—call it what you will—at the root of all citizenship, clanship, and family love? Is it not the same feeling which, granting they remain at all, makes old friendships dearer than any new? Nay, to go to the very sacredest and closest bond, is it not that which makes an old

man see to the last in his old wife's faded face the beauty which perhaps nobody ever saw except himself, but which he sees and delights in still, simply because it is familiar, and his own?

To people who possess a large share of this rare (shall I say, fatal?) characteristic of adhesiveness, living in lodgings is about the saddest life under the sun. Whether some dim foreboding of this fact crossed Elizabeth's mind, as she stood at the window watching for her mistresses' first arrival at "home," it is impossible to say. She could feel, though she was not accustomed to analyse her feelings. But she looked dull and sad—not cross,—even Ascott could not have accused her of "savageness."

And yet she had been somewhat tried. First, in going out what she termed "marketing," she had traversed a waste of streets, got lost several times, and returned with light weight in her butter, and sand in her moist sugar; also with the conviction that London tradesmen were the greatest rogues

alive. Secondly, a pottle of strawberries, which she had bought with her own money, to grace the tea-table with the only fruit Miss Leaf cared for, had turned out a large delusion, big and beautiful at top, and all below small, crushed, and stale. She had thrown it indignantly, pottle and all, into the kitchen fire.

Thirdly, she had had a war with the landlady, partly on the subject of their fire, which, with her Stowbury notions on the subject of coals, seemed wretchedly mean and small, and partly on the question of table-cloths at tea, which Mrs. Jones had "never heard of," especially when the use of plate and linen was included in the rent. And the dinginess of the article produced at last out of an omnium-gatherum sort of kitchen-cupboard, made an ominous impression upon the country girl, accustomed to clean, tidy country ways—where the kitchen was kept as neat as the parlour, and the bed-rooms were not a whit behind the sitting-rooms in comfort and orderliness. Here it seemed as if, supposing people could show a few

respectable living-rooms, they were content to sleep anywhere, and cook anyhow, out of anything, in the midst of any quantity of confusion and dirt. Elizabeth set all this down as "London," and hated it accordingly.

She had tried to ease her mind by arranging and re-arranging the furniture—regular lodging-house furniture—table, six chairs, horse-hair sofa, a whatnot, and the chiffonnier, with a tea-caddy upon it, of which the respective keys had been solemnly presented to Miss Hilary. But still the parlour looked homeless and bare; and the yellowish paper on the walls, the large patterned, many-coloured Kidderminster on the floor, gave an involuntary sense of discomfort and dreariness. Besides, No. 15 was on the shady side of the street—cheap lodgings always are; and no one who has not lived in the like lodgings—not a house—can imagine what it is to inhabit perpetually one room where the sunshine just peeps in for an hour a day, and vanishes by eleven A.M., leaving behind in winter a chill

dampness, and in summer a heavy, dusty atmosphere, that, in spite of all efforts to shake it off, weighs like lead on the spirits. No wonder that, as is statistically known and proved, cholera stalks, fever rages, and the registrar's list is always swelled, along the shady side of a London street.

Elizabeth felt this, though she had not the dimmest idea why. She stood watching the sunset light fade out of the topmost windows of the opposite house—ghostly reflection of some sunset over fields and trees far away; and she listened to the long, monotonous cry melting away round the Crescent, and beginning again at the other end of the street—"Straw-berries! straw-berries!" Also, with an eye to to-morrow's Sunday dinner, she investigated the cart of the tired costermonger, who crawled along beside his equally tired donkey, reiterating at times, in tones hoarse with a day's bawling, his dreary "Cauli-flow-er! cauli-flow-er!—Fine new peas, sixpnece peck!"

But, alas! the peas were neither fine nor

new; and the cauliflowers were regular Saturday night's cauliflowers. Besides, Elizabeth suddenly doubted whether she had any right, unordered, to buy these things, which, from being at Stowbury common garden necessaries, had here, in London, become expensive luxuries. This thought, with some others that it led to, her unwonted state of idleness, and the dulness of everything about her—what is so dull as a "quiet" London street on a summer evening?—actually made Elizabeth stand, motionless and meditative, for a quarter of an hour.

Then she started to hear two cabs drive up to the door; the "family" had at length arrived.

Ascott was there too. Two new portmanteaus and a splendid hat-box cast ignominy upon his aunt's poor Stowbury luggage; and—Elizabeth's sharp eyes noticed—there was also his trunk which she had seen lying detained for rent in his Gower Street lodgings. Consequently, somehow or by somebody, the arrears must have been

paid. But the young man himself looked quite easy and comfortable; handed out his aunt Johanna, ordered the luggage about, and paid the cabmen with such a magnificent air, that they touched their hats to him, and winked at one another as much as to say, "That 's a real gentleman!"

In which statement the landlady evidently coincided, and courtesied low, when Miss Leaf, introducing him as "my nephew," hoped that a room could be found for him. Which at last there was, by his appropriating Miss Leaf's, while she and Hilary contented themselves with one at the top of the house. But they agreed, Ascott must have a good airy room to study in.

"You know, my dear boy," said his aunt Johanna to him — and at her tender tone he looked a little downcast, as when he was a small fellow and had been forgiven something — "you know you will have to work very hard — for all our sakes."

"All right, aunt! I 'm your man for work! This will be a jolly room; and I can smoke up the chimney capitally."

So they came down stairs quite cheerfully, and Ascott applied himself with the best of appetites to what he called a "hungry" tea. True, the ham, which Elizabeth had to fetch from an eating-house hard by, cost two shillings a pound, and the eggs, which caused her another war with the landlady over the relighting of the fire to boil them, were dismissed by the young gentleman as "horrid stale." Still, woman-like, when there is a man in the question, his aunts let him have his way. It seemed as if they had resolved to try their utmost to make the new home to which he came, or rather was driven, a pleasant home, and to bind him to it with cords of love, the only cords worth anything, though sometimes — Heaven knows why — even they fail, and are snapped and thrown aside like straws.

Whenever Elizabeth went in and out of the parlour, she always heard lively talk going on among the family: Ascott making his jokes, telling about his college life, and planning his life to come, as a surgeon in full practice, on the most extensive scale.

And when she brought in the chamber candles, she saw him kiss his aunts affectionately, and even help his aunt Johanna — who looked frightfully pale and tired, but smiling still — to her bed-room door.

"You 'll not sit up long, my dear? No reading to-night?" said she, anxiously.

"Not a bit of it. And I 'll be up with the lark to-morrow morning. I really will, auntie. I 'm going to turn over a new leaf, you know."

She smiled again at the immemorial joke, kissed and blessed him, and the door shut upon her and Hilary.

Ascott descended to the parlour, threw himself on the sofa with an air of great relief, and an exclamation of satisfaction, that "the women" were all gone. He did not perceive Elizabeth, who, hidden behind, was kneeling to arrange something in the chiffonnier, till she rose up and proceeded to fasten the parlour shutters.

"Hollo! are you there? Come, I 'll do that when I go to bed. You may 'slope,' if you like."

"Eh, sir?"

"Slope, mizzle, cut your stick; don't you understand? Anyhow, don't stop here bothering me."

"I don't mean to," replied Elizabeth; gravely, rather than gruffly, as if she had made up her mind to things as they were, and was determined to be a belligerent party no longer. Besides, she was older now: too old to have things forgiven to her that might be overlooked in a child; and she had received a long lecture from Miss Hilary on the necessity of showing respect to Mr. Ascott, or Mr. Leaf, as it was now decided he was to be called, in his dignity and responsibility as the only masculine head of the family.

As he lay and lounged there, with his eyes lazily shut, Elizabeth stood a minute gazing at him. Then, steadfast in her new good behaviour, she inquired "if he wanted anything more to-night?"

"Confound you! No! Yes; stop." And the young man took a furtive investigation

of the plain, honest face, and not over-graceful, ultra-provincial figure, which still characterised his aunt's "South Sea Islander."

"I say, Elizabeth, I want you to do something for me." He spoke so civilly, almost coaxingly, that Elizabeth turned round surprised. "Would you just go and ask the landlady if she has got such a thing as a latch-key?"

"A what, sir?"

"A latch-key — a — oh, she knows. Every London house has it. Tell her I'll take care of it, and lock the front-door all right. She needn't be afraid of thieves."

"Very well, sir."

Elizabeth went, but shortly reappeared with the information that Mrs. Jones had gone to bed: in the kitchen, she supposed, as she could not get in. But she laid on the table the large street-door key.

"Perhaps that 's what you wanted, Mr. Leaf. Though I think you needn't be the least afraid of robbers, for there 's three bolts, and a chain besides."

"All right," cried Ascott, smothering down a laugh. "Thank you! That 's for you," throwing a half-crown across the table.

Elizabeth took it up demurely, and put it down again. Perhaps she did not like him well enough to receive presents from him; perhaps she thought, being an honest-minded girl, that a young man who could not pay his rent had no business to be giving away half-crowns; or else she herself had not been, so much as many servants are, in the habit of taking them. For Miss Hilary had put into Elizabeth some of her own feeling as to this questionable habit of paying an inferior with money for any little civility or kindness which, from an equal, would be accepted simply as kindness, and only requited with thanks. Anyhow, the coin remained on the table, and the door was just shutting upon Elizabeth, when the young gentleman turned round again.

"I say, since my aunts are so horridly timid of robbers and such like, you 'd better not tell them anything about the latch-key."

Elizabeth stood a minute perplexed, and then replied briefly: "Miss Hilary isn't a bit timid; and I always tells Miss Hilary everything."

Nevertheless, though she was so ignorant of worldly ways as never even to have heard of a latch-key, she had the wit to see that all was not right. She even lay awake, in her closet off Miss Leaf's room, whence she could hear the murmur of her two mistresses talking together, long after they retired — lay broad awake for an hour or more, trying to put things together — the sad things that she felt certain must have happened that day to her mistresses and their nephew. Also, wondering what Mr. Ascott could possibly want with the key; why he had asked her about it, instead of telling his aunts at once; and why he had treated her in the matter with such astonishing civility.

It may be said, a servant had no business to think about these things, to criticise her young master's proceedings, or wonder why her mistresses were sad: that her duty was merely to go about her work like an

automaton, and not speculate upon anything beyond it, being "only a servant." I can but answer to those who like such service, let them have it! and as they sow they will assuredly reap.

But long after Elizabeth, young and hearty, was soundly snoring on her hard, cramped bed, Johanna and Hilary Leaf, after a brief mutual pretence of sleep, soon discovered by both, lay consulting together over ways and means. How could the family expenses, beginning with twenty-five shillings per week as rent, possibly be met by the only actual certain family income, their fifty pounds per annum from a mortgage? For the Misses Leaf were of that old-fashioned stamp which believed that to reckon an income by mere probabilities is either insanity or dishonesty.

Common arithmetic soon proved that this fifty pounds a year could not maintain them; in fact they must soon draw on the little sum — already dipped into to-day, for Ascott's rent — which had been produced by the sale of the Stowbury furniture. That sale,

they now found, had been a mistake: so great was the expense of furnished lodgings; and they half feared whether the whole change from Stowbury to London had not also been a mistake — one of those sad errors in judgement which we all commit sometimes, and have to abide by, and make the best of, and learn from if we can. Happy those to whom "Dinna greet ower spilt milk"— a proverb wise as cheerful, which Hilary, knowing well who it came from, repeated to Johanna to comfort her — teaches a second brave lesson, how to avoid spilling the milk a second time.

And then they consulted anxiously about what was to be done to earn money.

Teaching presented itself as the only resource. In those days women's rights had not been discussed so freely as at present. There was a strong feeling that the principal thing required of us was not rights, but duties — duties owed to ourselves, our home, our family and friends. There was a deep conviction — now, alas! slowly disappearing — that a woman, be she single or

married, should never throw herself out of the safe circle of domestic life, till the last extremity of necessity; that it is wiser to keep, or help to keep, a home, by learning how to economise income, cook dinners, make and mend clothes, and by the law that "prevention is better than cure," study all preservative means of holding a family together, as women, and women alone can —ay, far wiser than to dash into men's sphere of trades and professions, thereby, in most instances, fighting an unequal battle, and coming out of it maimed, broken, unsexed; turned into beings that are neither men nor women, with the faults and corresponding sufferings of both, and the compensations of neither.

"I don't see," said poor Hilary, "what I can do but teach. And oh, if I could only get daily pupils, so that I might be able to come home of nights, and creep into the fireside; and have time to mend the stockings and look after Ascott's linen, so that he need not be so awfully extravagant in his clothes."

"It is Ascott who ought to earn the family income, and have his aunt to keep house for him," observed Johanna. "That was the way in my time; and I believe it is the right way. The man ought to go out into the world and earn the money; the woman ought to stay at home and wisely expend it."

"And yet that way is not always possible. We know, of ourselves, instances where it was not."

"Ah, yes!" assented Johanna, sighing. For she, far more than Hilary, viewed the present family circumstances in the light of past family history — a light too sad almost to bear looking at. "But in ours, as in most similar cases, was a something not right, something which forced men and women out of their natural places. If our father, and Henry, had been what they ought to have been — But they are gone. No!" continued Miss Leaf, earnestly; "it may be sometimes a mournful inevitable necessity, but I never can believe it to be a right thing, or a thing that should be volun-

tarily imitated, for women to go knocking about the world like men — and —"

"And I am not intending to do any such thing," said Hilary, half amused. "I am only going to try every rational means of earning a little money to keep the family till such time as Ascott can decide on his future, and find a suitable opportunity for establishing himself in practice. In some of the new neighbourhoods about London he says he has a capital chance; he will immediately set about inquiries. A good idea, don't you think?"

"Yes," said Johanna, briefly. But they did not discuss this as they had discussed their own plans; and, it was noticeable, they never even referred to, as a portion of the family finances, that pound a week which, with many regrets that it was so small, Ascott had promised to pay to his aunts, as his contribution to the expenses of the household.

And now the dawn was beginning to break, and the lively London sparrows to chirp in the chimneys. So Hilary insisted

on their talking no more, but going to sleep properly.

"Very well. Good night, my blessing!" said Johanna, softly. And perhaps indeed her "blessing," with that strange bright courage of her own — years after, when Hilary looked back upon her old self, how utterly mad this courage seemed! — had taken the weight of care from the elder and feebler heart, so that Johanna turned round and soon slept.

But long after, till the dawn melted into perfect daylight, did Hilary lie, open-eyed, listening to quarter after quarter of the loud St. Pancras clock. Brave she was, this little woman, fully as brave and cheerful-hearted as, for Johanna's sake, she made herself out to be; and now that the paralysed monotony of her Stowbury life was gone, and that she was in the midst of the whirl of London, she felt doubly bright and brave. The sense of resistance, of dogged perseverance, of "fighting it out" to the last, was strong in her, stronger than in most women, or else it was the reflection in

her own of that nature — manly and true — which was her ideal of everything great and good.

"No," she said to herself, after thinking over for the hundredth time every difficulty that lay before them all — meeting and looking in the face every wild beast in the way, even that terrible beast which, though often approaching, had never yet visited the Leaf family, "the wolf at the door" — "No, I don't think I am afraid. I think I never shall be afraid of anything in this world, if only — only ——"

"If only he loves me." That was it, which broke off, unspoken; the helpless woman's cry — the cruel craving for the one deepest want of a woman's life — deeper than the same want in man's, or in most men's, because it is more individual — not "If only I am loved," but "If only he loves me." And as Hilary resolutely shut her eyes, and forced her aching head to cease thinking, sharper than ever, as always was the case when she felt weary, mentally or physically, came her longing for the

hand to cling to, the breast to lean against — the heart at once strong and tender, which even the bravest woman feels at times she piteously needs. A heart which can comfort and uphold her, with the strength, not of another woman like herself, but of a man, encouraging her, as perhaps her very weakness encourages him, to endure a little longer. But this support, in any shape, from any man, the women of the Leaf family had never known.

The nearest approach to it were those letters from India, which had become, Johanna sometimes smilingly said, a family institution. For they were family letters; there was no mystery about them; they were passed from one to the other, and commented on in perfect freedom — so freely indeed, that Selina had never penetrated into the secret of them at all. But their unvarying punctuality, their faithful remembrance of the smallest things concerning the past, their strong interest in anything and everything belonging to the present of these his old friends, were to

the other two sisters sufficient proof how thoroughly the writer might be believed in.

Hilary did believe, and in her perfect trust was perfect rest. Whether he ever married her or not, she felt sure, surer and surer every day, that to her had been sent that best blessing — the lot of so few women — a thoroughly good man to be loved by and to love.

So with his face in her memory, and the sound of his voice in her ear, as distinctly as if it had been only yesterday that he said, "You must trust me, Hilary," she whispered to herself, "I do, Robert, I do!" and went to sleep as peacefully as a child.

CHAPTER XI.

With a sublime indifference to popular superstition, or rather because they did not think of it till all their arrangements were completed, the Misses Leaf had accomplished their grand Hegira on a Friday. Consequently, their first day at No. 15 was Sunday.

Sunday in London always strikes a provincial person. It has two such distinct sides. First, the eminently respectable, decorous, religious side, which Hilary and Selina observed, when, about eleven A.M., they joined the stream of well-dressed, well-to-do-looking people, solitary or in families, who poured forth from handsome houses in streets or squares, to form the crowded congregation of St. Pancras Church. The opposite side Hilary also

saw, when Ascott, who, in spite of his declaration overnight, had not risen in time for breakfast, penitently coaxed his "pretty aunt" to let him take her to the afternoon service in Westminster Abbey. They wended their way through Tottenham Court Road, Oxford Street, Regent Street, and across the Park, finding shops open, or half open, vehicles plying, and people streaming down each side of the streets.

Hilary did not quite like it, and yet her heart was tender over the poor hard-worked-looking Cockneys, who seemed so excessively to enjoy their Sunday stroll, their Sunday mouthful of fresh air; or the small Sunday treat their sickly, undersized children had in lying on the grass, and feeding the ducks in St. James's Park.

She tried to talk the matter out with Ascott, but though he listened politely for a minute or two, he evidently took no interest in such things. Nor did he even in the grand old Abbey, with its tree-like arched avenues of immemorial stone, its painted windows, through which the

coloured sunshine made a sort of heavenly mist of light, and its innumerable graves of generations below. Hilary woke from her trance of solemn delight to find her nephew amusing himself with staring at the people about him, making *sotto voce* quizzical remarks upon them, in the intervals of the service, and, finally, the instant it was ended, starting up in extreme satisfaction, evidently feeling that he had done his duty, and that it had been, to use his own phrase, "a confounded bore."

Yet he meant to be kind to his pretty aunt — told her he liked to walk with her, because she was so pretty, praised her dress, so neat and tasteful, though a little old-fashioned. But he would soon alter that, he said; he would dress all his aunts in silk and satin, and give them a carriage to ride in; there should be no end to their honour and prosperity. Nay, coming home, he took her a long way round—or she thought so, being tired—to show her the sort of house he meant to have. Very grand it seemed to her Stowbury eyes, with

pillars and a flight of steps up to the door, more fit, she ventured to suggest, for a retired merchant than a struggling young surgeon.

"Oh, but we dare not show the struggle, or nobody would ever trust us," said Ascott, with a knowing look. "Bless you, many a young fellow sets up a house, and even a carriage, on tick, and drives and drives about till he drives himself into a practice. The world's all a make-believe, and you must meet humbug with humbug. That's the way, I assure you, Aunt Hilary."

Aunt Hilary fixed her honest eyes on the lad's face—the lad, so little younger than herself, and yet who at times, when he let out sayings such as this, seemed so awfully, so pitifully old; and she felt thankful that, at all risks and costs, they had come to London to be beside him, to help him, to save him, if he needed saving, as women only can. For, after all, he was but a boy. And though, as he walked by her side, stalwart and manly, the thought smote her painfully that many a young fellow of his

age was the stay and bread-winner of some widowed mother or sister, nay, even of wife and child, still she repeated, cheerfully, "What can one expect from him? He is only a boy."

God help the women who, for those belonging to them—husbands, fathers, brothers, lovers, sons—have, ever so tenderly, to *apologise*.

When they came in sight of St. Pancras Church, Ascott said, suddenly, "I think you 'll know your way now, Aunt Hilary."

"Certainly. Why?"

"Because—you wouldn't be vexed if I left you? I have an engagement—some fellows that I dine with, out at Hampstead or Richmond, or Blackwall, every Sunday. Nothing wicked, I assure you. And you know it 's capital for one's health to get a Sunday in fresh air."

"Yes; but Aunt Johanna will be sorry to miss you."

"Will she? Oh, you 'll smooth her down. Stay! Tell her I shall be back to tea."

"We shall be having tea directly."

"I declare I had quite forgotten. Aunt Hilary, you must change your hours. They don't suit me at all. No men can ever stand early dinners. Bye, bye! You are the very prettiest auntie. Be sure you get home safe. Hollo, there! That's my omnibus."

He jumped on the top of it, and was off.

Aunt Hilary stood quite confounded, and striving against one of those strange sinkings of the heart which had come over her several times this day. It was not that Ascott showed any unkindness—that there was any actual badness in him. Still there was a want—want of earnestness, steadfastness, truthfulness, a something more discoverable as the lack of something else than as aught in itself tangibly and perceptibly wrong. It made her sad; it caused her to look forward to his future with an anxious heart. It was so different from the kind of anxiety, and yet settled repose, with which she thought of the only other man in whose future she felt the smallest interest. Of Robert Lyon she was certain that whatever

misfortune visited him he would bear it in the best way it could possibly be borne; whatever temptation assailed him he would fight against it as a brave and good Christian should fight. But Ascott?

Ascott's life was as yet an unanswered query. She could but leave it in Omnipotent hands.

So she found her way home, asking it once or twice of civil policemen, and going a little distance round—dare I make this romantic confession about so sensible and practical a little woman?—that she might walk once up Burton Street and down again. But nobody knew the fact, and it did nobody any harm.

Meantime at No. 15 the afternoon had passed heavily enough. Miss Selina had gone to lie down—she always did of Sundays; and Elizabeth, after making her comfortable, by the little attentions that she never failed to require, had descended to the dreary wash-house, which had been appropriated to herself, under the name of a "private kitchen," in the which, after all

the cleanings and improvements she could achieve, she sat like Marius among the ruins of Carthage, and sighed for the tidy, bright house-place at Stowbury. Already, from her brief experience, she had decided that London people were horrid shams, because they did not in the least care to have their kitchens comfortable. She wondered how she should ever exist in this one, and might have carried her sad and sullen face upstairs, if Miss Leaf had not come downstairs, and glancing about with that ever-gentle smile of hers, said kindly: "Well, it is not a very pleasant place, but you have made the best of it, Elizabeth. We must all put up with something, you know. Now, as my eyes are not very good to-day, suppose you come and read me a chapter."

So, in the quiet parlour, the maid sat down opposite her mistress, and read aloud out of that Book which says distinctly—

"*Servants, be obedient to them that are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as unto Christ: knowing that whatsoever good thing*

any man doeth, the same shall he receive of the Lord, whether he be bond or free."

And yet says immediately after—

"*Ye masters, do the same things unto them, forbearing threatening: knowing that your Master also is in heaven: neither is there respect of persons with Him.*"

And I think that Master whom Paul served, not in preaching only, but also in practice, when he sent back the slave Onesimus to Philemon, praying that he might be received, "not now as a servant, but above a servant, a brother beloved," that Divine Master must have looked tenderly upon these two women—both women, though of such different age and position, and taught them through His Spirit in His Word, as only He can teach.

The reading was disturbed by a carriage driving up to the door, and a knock, a tremendously grand and forcible footman's knock, which made Miss Leaf start in her easy-chair.

"But it can't be visitors to us. We know nobody. Sit still, Elizabeth."

It was a visitor, however, though by what ingenuity he found them out, remained, when they came to think of it, a great puzzle. A card was sent in by the dirty servant of Mrs. Jones, speedily followed by a stout, bald-headed, round-faced man—I suppose I ought to write "gentleman"—in whom, though she had not seen him for years, Miss Leaf found no difficulty in recognising the grocer's 'prentice boy, now Mr. Peter Ascott, of Russell Square.

She rose to receive him; there was always a stateliness in Miss Leaf's reception of strangers; a slight formality belonging to her own past generation, and to the time when the Leafs were a "county family." Perhaps this extra dignity, graceful as it was, overpowered the little man; or else, being a bachelor, he was unaccustomed to ladies' society: but he grew red in the face, twiddled his hat, and then cast a sharp inquisitive glance towards her.

"Miss Leaf, I presume, ma'am. The eld est?"

"I am the eldest Miss Leaf, and very glad

to have an opportunity of thanking you for your long kindness to my nephew. Elizabeth, give Mr. Ascott a chair."

While doing so, and before her disappearance, Elizabeth took a rapid observation of the visitor, whose name and history were perfectly familiar to her. Most small towns have their hero, and Stowbury's pet hero was Peter Ascott, the grocer's boy, the little fellow who had gone up to London to seek his fortune, and had, strange to say, found it. Whether by industry or luck—except that industry is luck, and luck is only another word for industry—he had gradually risen to be a large City merchant, a drysalter I conclude it would be called, with a handsome house, carriage, &c. He had never revisited his native place, which indeed could hardly be expected of him, as he had no relations; but, when asked, as was not seldom of course, he subscribed liberally to its charities.

Altogether he was a decided hero in the place, and though people really knew very little about him, the less they knew the

more they gossipped; holding him up to the rising generation as a modern Dick Whittington, and reverencing him extremely as one who had shed glory on his native town. Even Elizabeth had conceived a great notion of Peter Ascott. When she saw this little fat man, coarse and common-looking in spite of his good clothes and diamond ring, and in manner a curious mixture of pomposity and awkwardness, she laughed to herself, thinking what a very uninteresting individual it was about whom Stowbury had told so many interesting stories.

However, she went up to inform Miss Selina of the visitor, and prevent her making her appearance before him in the usual Sunday dishabille in which she indulged when no callers were expected.

After the first awkwardness, Mr. Peter Ascott became quite at his ease with Miss Leaf. He began to talk—not of Stowbury, that subject was tacitly ignored by both—but of London, and then of "my house in Russell Square," "my carriage," "my servants"—the inconvenience of keeping

coachmen who would drink, and footmen who would not clean the plate properly; ending by what was a favourite moral axiom of his, that "wealth and position are heavy responsibilities."

He himself seemed, however, not to have been quite overwhelmed by them; he was fat and flourishing—with an acuteness and power in the upper half of his face which accounted for his having attained his present position. The lower half—somehow Miss Leaf did not like it, she hardly knew why, though a physiognomist might have known. For Peter Ascott had the underhanging, obstinate, sensual lip, the large throat—bull-necked, as it has been called; indications of that essentially coarse nature which may be born with the nobleman as with the clown; which no education can refine, and no talent, though it may co-exist with it, can ever entirely remove. He reminded one, perforce, of the rough old proverb, "You can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear."

Still, Mr. Ascott was not a bad man,

though something deeper than his glorious indifference to grammar, and his dropped h's—which, to steal some one's joke, might have been swept up in bushels from Miss Leaf's parlour floor—made it impossible for him ever to become, by any culture whatsoever, a gentleman.

They talked of Ascott, as being the most convenient mutual subject; and Miss Leaf expressed the gratitude which her nephew felt, and she earnestly hoped would ever show, towards his kind godfather.

Mr. Ascott looked pleased.

"Um—yes, Ascott's not a bad fellow—believe he means well; but weak, ma'am, I'm afraid he's weak. Knows nothing of business—has no business habits whatever. However, we must make the best of him; I don't repent anything I've done for him."

"I hope not," said Miss Leaf, gravely.

And then there ensued an uncomfortable pause, which was happily broken by the opening of the door, and the sweeping in of a large goodly figure.

"My sister, Mr. Ascott; my sister Selina."

The little stout man actually started, and, as he bowed, blushed up to the eyes.

Miss Selina was, as I have stated, the beauty of the family, and had once been an acknowledged Stowbury belle. Even now, though nigh upon forty, when carefully and becomingly dressed, her tall figure, and her well-featured, fair-complexioned, unwrinkled face, made her still appear a very personable woman. At any rate, she was not faded enough, nor the City magnate's heart cold enough, to prevent a sudden revival of the vision which—in what now seemed an almost antediluvian stage of existence—had dazzled, Sunday after Sunday, the eyes of the grocer's lad. If there is one pure spot in a man's heart—even the very worldliest of men—it is usually his boyish first love.

So Peter Ascott looked hard at Miss Selina, then into his hat, then, as good luck would have it, out of the window, where he caught sight of his carriage and horses.

These revived his spirits, and made him recognise what he was—Mr. Ascott of Russell Square, addressing himself in the character of a benevolent patron to the Leaf family.

"Glad to see you, Miss. Long time since we met — neither of us so young as we have been — but you do wear well, I must say."

Miss Selina drew back; she was within an inch of being highly offended, when she too happened to catch a glimpse of the carriage and horses. So she sat down and entered into conversation with their owner; and, when she liked, nobody could be more polite and agreeable than Miss Selina.

So it happened that the handsome equipage crawled round and round the Crescent, or stood pawing the silent Sunday street before No. 15, for very nearly an hour, even till Hilary came home.

It was vexatious to have to make excuses for Ascott; particularly as his godfather said, with a laugh, that "young fellows would be young fellows; they needn't ex-

pect to see the lad till midnight, or till to-morrow morning."

But though in this and other things he somewhat annoyed the ladies from Stowbury, no one could say he was not civil to them — exceedingly civil. He offered them Botanical Garden tickets — Zoological Garden tickets; he even, after some meditation and knitting of his shaggy grey eyebrows, bolted out with an invitation for the whole family to dinner at Russell Square the following Sunday.

"I always give my dinners on Sunday. I've no time any other day," said he, when Miss Leaf gently hesitated. "Come or not, just as you like."

Miss Selina, to whom the remark was chiefly addressed, bowed the most gracious acceptance.

The visitor took very little notice of Miss Hilary. Probably, if asked, he would have described her as a small, shabbily-dressed person, looking very like a governess. Indeed, the fact of her governess-ship seemed suddenly to recur to him; he asked her if

she meant to set up another school, and being informed that she rather wished private pupils, promised largely that she should have the full benefit of his "patronage" among his friends. Then he departed, leaving a message for Ascott to call next day, as he wished to speak to him.

"For you must be aware, Miss Leaf, that though your nephew's allowance is nothing — a mere drop in the bucket out of my large income — still, when it comes year after year, and no chance of his shifting for himself, the most benevolent man in the world feels inclined to stop the supplies. Not that I shall do that — at least not immediately: he is a fine young fellow, whom I 'm rather proud to have helped a step up the ladder, and I 've a great respect" —here he bowed to Miss Selina — "a great respect for your family. Still there must come a time when I shall be obliged to shut up my purse-strings. You understand, ma'am?"

"I do," Miss Leaf answered, trying to speak with dignity, and yet patience, for she saw Hilary's face beginning to flame. "And

I trust, Mr. Ascott, my nephew will soon cease to be an expense to you. It was your own voluntary kindness that brought it upon yourself, and I hope you have not found, never will find, either him or us ungrateful."

"Oh, as to that, ma'am, I don't look for gratitude. Still, I hope Ascott will work his way into a good position—and he 'll be the first of the family that ever did, I reckon—but I beg your pardon, Miss Leaf. —Ladies, I 'll bid you good day. Will your servant call my carriage?"

The instant he was gone, Hilary burst forth —

"If I were Ascott, I 'd rather starve in a garret, break stones in the high-road, or buy a broom and sweep a crossing, than I 'd be dependent on this man—this pompous, purse-proud, illiterate fool!"

"No, not a fool," reproved Johanna. "An acute, clear-headed, nor, I think, bad-hearted man. Coarse and common, certainly; but if we were to hate everything coarse or common, we should find plenty to

hate. Besides, though he bestows his kindness in an unpleasant way, it is kindness. Think how very, very much he has done for Ascott."

"Johanna, I think you would find a good word for the de'il himself, as we used to say," cried Hilary, laughing. "Well, Selina, and what is your opinion of our stout friend?"

Miss Selina, bridling a little, declared that she did not see so much to complain of in Mr. Ascott. He was not educated certainly, but he was a most respectable person. And his calling upon them so soon was very civil and attentive. She thought, considering his present position, they should forget — indeed, as Christians they were bound to forget — that he was once their grocer's boy. She was quite of opinion that they ought to dine with him next Sunday.

"For my part, I shall go, although it is Sunday. I consider it in the light of a religious duty — my duty towards my neighbour."

"Which is, according to the Catechism, 'to love him as yourself.' Very well! I am sure, Selina, I have no objection. It would be a grand romantic wind-up to the story which Stowbury used to tell — of how the 'prentice boy stared his eyes out at the beautiful young lady; and you would get the advantage of 'my house in Russell Square,' 'my carriage and servants,' and be able to shed a glory upon your whole family. Do, now! set your cap at Peter Ascott."

Here Hilary, breaking out into one of her childish fits of irrepressible laughter, was startled to see Selina's face one blaze of indignation.

"Hold your tongue, you silly chit, and don't chatter about things you cannot understand."

And she swept majestically from the room.

"What have I done? Why, she is really vexed. If I had thought she would have taken it in earnest, I would never have said a word."

But Miss Selina's fits of irritation were

so common, that the sisters rarely troubled themselves long about them. And when, at tea-time, she came down in the best of spirits, they met her half-way, as they always did, thankful for these brief calms in the family atmosphere, which never lasted too long.

It was a somewhat heavy evening. They waited supper till after ten; and yet Ascott did not appear. Miss Leaf read the chapter as usual; and Elizabeth was sent to bed, but still no sign of the absentee.

"I will sit up for him. He cannot be many minutes now," said his aunt Hilary, and settled herself in the solitary parlour, which one candle and no fire made as cheerless as could possibly be.

There she waited till midnight, before the young man came in. Perhaps he was struck with compunction by her weary white face — by her silent lighting of his candle, for he made her a thousand apologies.

"'Pon my honour, Aunt Hilary, I'll never keep you up so late again. Poor

dear auntie, how tired she looks!" and he kissed her affectionately. "But if you were a young fellow, and got among other young fellows, and they over-persuaded you —"

"You should learn to say, No."

"Ah," with a sigh, "so I ought, if I were as good as my aunt Hilary."

CHAPTER XII.

Months slipped by; the trees in Burton Crescent had long been all bare; the summer cries of itinerant vegetable dealers and flower-sellers had vanished out of the quiet street. The three sisters almost missed them, sitting in that one dull parlour from morning till night, in the intense solitude of people who, having neither heart nor money to spend in gaieties, live forlorn in London lodgings, and knowing nobody, have nobody to visit, nobody to visit them.

Except Mr. Ascott, who still called, and occasionally stayed to tea. The hospitalities, however, were all on their side. The first entertainment — to which Selina insisted upon going, and Johanna thought Hilary and Ascott had better go too — was splendid enough, but they were the only

ladies present; and though Mr. Ascott did the honours with great magnificence, putting Miss Selina at the head of his table, where she looked exceedingly well, still the sisters agreed it was better that all further invitations to Russell Square should be declined. Miss Selina herself said it would be more dignified and decorous.

Other visitors they had none. Ascott never offered to bring any of his friends; and gradually they saw very little of him. He was frequently out, especially at meal times, so that his aunts gave up the struggle to make the humble dinners better and more to his liking, and would even have hesitated to take the money which he was understood to pay for his board, had he ever offered it — which he did not. Yet still, whenever he did happen to remain with them a day, or an evening, he was good and affectionate, and always entertained them with descriptions of what great things he would do as soon as he got into practice.

Meantime they kept house as economi-

cally as possible upon the little ready money they had, hoping that more would come in — that Hilary would get pupils.

But Hilary never did. To anybody who knows London this fact will not be surprising. The wonder was in the Misses Leaf being so simple as to imagine that a young country lady, settling herself in lodgings in an obscure metropolitan street, without friends or introduction, could ever expect such a thing. Nothing but her own daring, and the irrepressible wellspring of hope that was in her healthy youth, could have sustained her in what, ten years after, would have appeared to her, as it certainly was, downright insanity. But Heaven takes care of the mad — the righteously and unselfishly mad—and Heaven took care of poor Hilary.

The hundred labours she went through — weariness of body and travail of soul; the risks she ran; the pitfalls she escaped — what need to record here? Many have recorded the like, many more have known them, and acknowledged that when such

histories are reproduced in books, imagination fades compared with reality. Hilary never looked back upon that time herself without a shuddering wonder how she could have dared all and gone through all! Possibly she never could, but for the sweet old face, growing older, yet sweeter, every day, which smiled upon her the minute she opened the door of that dull parlour, and made even No. 15 look like home.

When she told, sometimes gaily, sometimes with burning, bursting tears, the tale of her day's efforts and day's failures, it was always comfort to feel Johanna's hand on her hair, Johanna's voice whispering over her. "Never mind, my child, all will come right in time. All happens for good."

And the face, withered and worn, yet calm as a summer sea, full of the "peace which passeth all understanding," was a living comment on the truth of these words.

Another comfort Hilary had—Elizabeth. During her long days of absence, wander-

ing from one end of London to the other, after advertisements that she had answered, or governess institutions to which she had applied, the domestic affairs fell almost entirely into the hands of Elizabeth. It was she who bought in, and kept a jealous eye, not unneeded, over provisions; she who cooked and waited, and sometimes even put a helping hand, coarse but willing, into the family sewing and mending. This had now become so vital a necessity that it was fortunate Miss Leaf had no other occupation, and Miss Selina no other entertainment, than stitch, stitch, stitch, at the ever-beginning, never-ending wardrobe wants which assail decent poverty everywhere, and especially in London.

"Clothes seem to wear out frightfully fast here," said Hilary one day, as she was putting on her oldest gown, to suit a damp foggy day, when the streets were slippery with the mud of settled rain.

"I saw such beautiful merino dresses in a shop in Southampton Row," insinuated Elizabeth; but her mistress shook her head.

"No, no; my old black silk will do capitally, and I can easily put on something under my thin shawl. Nobody knows me; and people may wear what they like in London. Don't look so grave, Elizabeth. What does it signify if I can but keep myself warm? Now, run away."

Elizabeth obeyed, but shortly reappeared, with a bundle — a large old-fashioned Paisley shawl.

"Mother gave it me — her mistress gave it her; but we've never worn it, either of us. If only you didn't mind putting it on, just this once — this terrible wet day?"

The scarlet face, the entreating tones — there was no resisting them. One natural pang Hilary felt — that in her sharp poverty she had fallen so low as to be indebted to her servant, and then she too blushed, less for shame at accepting the kindness than for her own pride that could not at once receive it as such.

"Thank you, Elizabeth," she said, gravely and gently, and let herself be wrapped in

the thick shawl. Its gorgeous reds and yellows would, she knew, make her noticeable, even though "people might wear anything in London." Still, she put it on with a good grace; and all through her peregrinations that day it warmed, not only her shoulders, but her heart.

Coming home, she paused wistfully before a glittering shoe-shop—her poor little feet were so soaked and cold. Could she possibly afford a new pair of boots? It was not a matter of vanity—she had passed that stage. She did not care now how ugly and shabby looked the "wee feet" that had once been praised; but she felt that new boots might be a matter of health and prudence. Suppose she caught cold—fell ill—died:—died, leaving Johanna to struggle alone—died before Robert Lyon came home! Both thoughts struck sharp. She was too young still, or had not suffered enough, calmly to think of death and dying.

"It will do no harm to inquire the price. I might stop it out in omnibuses."

For this was the way every new article

of dress had to be procured—"stopping it out" of something else.

After trying several pairs—with a fierce, bitter blush at a small hole which the day's walking had worn in her well-darned stockings, and which she was sure the shopman saw, as well as an old lady who sat opposite—Hilary bought the stoutest and plainest pair of boots she could find. The bill overstepped her purse by sixpence, which she promised on delivery, and paid the rest. She had got into a nervous horror of letting any account stand over for a single day.

Look tenderly, reader, on this picture of struggles so small, of sufferings so uninteresting and mean. I paint it, not because it is original, but because it is so awfully real and true. Thousands of women, well-born, well-reared, know it to be true—burnt into them by the cruel conflict of their youth; happy they if it ended in their youth, while mind and body had still enough vitality and elasticity to endure! I paint it, likewise, because it accounts for the accusation sometimes made—especially by men—that

women are naturally "stingy"—much more than they themselves are. Possibly so; but in many instances, may it not have been this petty struggle with petty wants, this pitiful calculating of penny against penny, how best to save here and spend there, which narrows a woman's nature in spite of herself? It sometimes takes years of comparative ease and freedom from pecuniary cares, to counteract the grinding, lowering effects of a youth of poverty.

And I paint this picture too, literally, and not on its picturesque side—if, indeed, poverty has a picturesque side—in order to show another side which it really has—high, heroic, made up of dauntless endurance, self-sacrifice, and self-control. Also to indicate that blessing which narrow circumstances alone bestow, the habit of looking more to the realities than to the shows of things, and of finding pleasure in enjoyments mental rather than sensuous, inward rather than external. When people can truly recognise this, they cease either to be afraid or ashamed of poverty.

Hilary was not ashamed—not even now, when hers smote sharper and harder than it had ever done at Stowbury. She felt it a sore thing enough; but it never humiliated nor angered her. Either she was too proud or not proud enough; but her low estate always seemed to her too simply external a thing to affect her relations with the world outside. She never thought of being annoyed with the shopkeeper, who, though he trusted her with the sixpence, carefully took down her name and address: still less of suspecting the old lady opposite, who sat and listened to the transaction—apparently a well-to-do customer, clad in a rich black silk and handsome sable furs—of looking down upon her or despising her. Why should anybody despise her? She never despised anybody, except for wickedness.

So she waited contentedly, neither thinking of herself, nor of what others thought of her; but with her mind quietly occupied by the two thoughts which in any brief space of rest always recurred, calming down all annoyances, and raising her above the level of petty pains—Johanna and Robert

Lyon. Under the influence of these her tired face grew composed, and there arose a wistful, far-away, fond look in her eyes, which made it not wonderful that the said old lady—apparently an acute old lady in her way—should watch her, as we do occasionally watch strangers in whom we have become suddenly interested.

There is no accounting for these interests, or for the events to which they give rise. Sometimes they are pooh-poohed as "romantic," "unnatural," "like a bit in a novel;" and so on; yet they are facts continually occurring, to people of quick intuition, observation, and sympathy. Nay, even the most ordinary folk have known of or experienced the same, resulting in mysterious, life-long loves; firm friendships; strange yet often wonderfully happy marriages; sudden revolutions of fortune and destiny. These things are utterly unaccountable for, except by the belief in that inscrutable Providence which

> Shapes our ends,
> Rough-hew them as we will.

When Hilary left the shop, she was startled by a voice at her elbow.

"I beg your pardon, but if your way lies up Southampton Row, would you object to give an old woman a share of that capital umbrella of yours?"

"With pleasure," Hilary answered, though the oddness of the request amused her. And it was granted really with pleasure; for the old lady spoke with those "accents of the mountain tongue" which this foolish Hilary never recognised without a thrill at the heart.

"Maybe you think I ought to take a cab, and not be intruding upon strangers; but I am hale and hearty; and being only a street's length from my own door, I dislike to waste unnecessary shillings."

"Certainly," acquiesced Hilary, with a half-sigh: shillings were only too precious to her.

"I saw you in the boot-shop, and you seemed the sort of young lady who would do a kindness to an old body; so I said to myself, 'I'll ask her.'"

"I am glad you did." Poor girl! she felt unconsciously pleased at finding herself still able to show a kindness to anybody.

They walked on and on — it was certainly a long street's length — to the stranger's door, and Hilary went a good way round from hers; but she said nothing of this, concluding, of course, that her companion was unaware of where she lived — in which she was mistaken. They stopped at last before a respectable house near Brunswick Square, bearing a brass plate, with the words "Miss Balquidder."

"That is my name, and very much obliged to you, my dear. How it rains! Ye 're just droukit."

Hilary smiled, and shook her damp shawl. "I shall take no harm. I am used to go out in all weathers."

"Are you a governess?" The question was so direct and kindly, that it hardly seemed an impertinence.

"Yes; but I have no pupils, and I fear I shall never get any."

"Why not?"

"I suppose, because I know nobody here. It seems very difficult to get teaching in London. But I beg your pardon."

"I beg yours," said Miss Balquidder — not without a certain dignity — "for asking questions of a stranger. But I was once a stranger here myself, and had a 'sair fecht,' as we say in Scotland, before I could earn even my daily bread. Though I wasn't a governess, still I know pretty well what the sort of life is, and if I had daughters who must work for their bread, the one thing I would urge upon them should be — 'Never become a governess.'"

"Indeed! For what reason?"

"I'll not tell you now, my dear, standing as you are, with all your wet clothes on; but as I said, if you will do me the favour to call —"

"Thank you! I will," said Hilary, not sufficiently initiated in London caution to dread making a new acquaintance. Besides, she liked the rough-hewn, good-natured face; and the Scotch accent was sweet to her ear.

Yet when she reached home she was half shy of telling her sisters the engagement she had made. Selina was extremely shocked; and considered it quite necessary that the London Directory — the nearest clergyman — or, perhaps Mr. Ascott, who, living in the parish, must know — should be consulted as to Miss Balquidder's respectability.

"She has much more reason to question ours," recollected Hilary, with some amusement, "for I never told her my name or address. She does not know a single thing about me."

Which fact, arguing the matter energetically two days after, the young lady might not have been so sure of, could she have penetrated the ceiling overhead. In truth, Miss Balquidder, a prudent person, who never did things by halves, and, like most truly generous people, was cautious even in her extremest fits of generosity, had carefully set down in her tenacious memory the address Hilary gave to the boot-maker, and at that very moment was sitting in Mrs.

Jones' first-floor, deliberately discovering every single thing possible to be learned about the Leaf family.

Nevertheless, owing to Selina's indignant pertinacity, Hilary's own hesitation, and a dim hope of a pupil which rose up and faded like the rest, the possible acquaintance lay dormant for two or three weeks: till, alas! the fabulous wolf actually came to the door; and the sisters, after paying their week's rent, looked aghast at one another, not knowing where in the wide world the next week's rent was to come from.

"Thank God, we don't owe anything! not a penny," gasped Hilary.

"No; there is comfort in that," said Johanna. And the expression of her folded hands and upward face was not despairing, even though that of the poor widow of Zarephath, when her barrel of meal was gone, and her cruse of oil spent, could hardly have been sadder.

"I am sure we have wasted nothing, and cheated nobody — surely God will help us."

"I know He will, my child."

And the two sisters, elder and younger, kissed one another, cried a little, and then sat down to consider what was to be done.

Ascott must be told how hard things were with them. Hitherto they had not troubled him much with their affairs: indeed, he was so little at home. And, after some private consultation, both Johanna and Hilary decided that it was wisest to let the lad come and go as he liked; not attempting — as he once indignantly expressed it — "to tie him to their apron-strings." For instinctively these maiden ladies felt that with men, and, above all, young men, the only way to bind the wandering heart was to leave it free, except by trying their utmost to make home always a pleasant home.

It was touching to see their efforts when Ascott came in of evenings, to enliven, for his sake, the dull parlour at No. 15: how Johanna put away her mending, and Selina ceased to grumble, and Hilary began her

lively chat, which had never failed to brighten and amuse the household. Her nephew even sometimes acknowledged that wherever he went, he met nobody so "clever" as Aunt Hilary.

And, presuming upon her influence with him, on this night, after the rest were gone to bed, she — being always the boldest to do any unpleasant thing — said to him —

"Ascott, how are your business affairs progressing? When do you think you will be able to get into practice?"

"Oh, presently. There 's no hurry."

"I am not so sure of that. Do you know, my dear boy"— and she opened her purse, which contained a few shillings — "this is all the money we have in the world!"

"Nonsense," said Ascott, laughing. "I beg your pardon," he added, seeing it was with her no laughing matter, "but I am so accustomed to be hard up, that I don't seem to care. It always comes right somehow; at least with me."

"How?"

"Oh, I don't exactly know; but it does.

Don't fret, Aunt Hilary. I'll lend you a pound or two."

She drew back. These poor, proud, fond women, who, if their boy, instead of a fine gentleman, had been a helpless invalid, would have tended him, worked for him, nay, begged for him — cheerfully, oh, how cheerfully! wanting nothing in the whole world but his love — they could not ask him for his money. Even now, offered thus, Hilary felt as if to take a penny from him would be intolerable.

Still, the thing must be done.

"I wish, Ascott"— and she nerved herself to say what somebody *ought* to say to him —"I wish you would, not lend, but pay us the pound a week you said you could so easily spare."

"To be sure I will; what a thoughtless fellow I have been; but — but — I fancied you would have asked me if you wanted it. Never mind! you'll get it all in a lump. Let me see; how much will it come to? You are the best head going for arithmetic, Aunt Hilary. Do reckon it all up."

She did so; and the sum-total made Ascott open his eyes wide.

"Upon my soul! I had no idea it was so much. I'm very sorry, but I seem fairly cleaned out this quarter — only a few sovereigns left to keep the mill going. But you shall have them, or half of them, and I'll owe you the rest. Here!"

He emptied on the table, without counting, four or five pounds. Hilary took two, asking him gravely, "If he was sure he could spare so much? She did not wish to inconvenience him."

"Oh, not at all; and I wouldn't mind if it did; you have been good aunts to me."

He kissed her, with a sudden fit of compunction, and bade her good night, looking as if he did not care to be "bothered" any more.

Hilary retired, more sad, more hopeless about him than if he had slammed the door in her face, or scolded her like a trooper. Had he only met her seriousness in the same spirit, even though it had been a sullen or

angry spirit—and little as she said, he must have felt—she wished him to feel—that his aunts were displeased with him;— but that utterly unimpressible light-heartedness of his — there was no doing anything with it. There was, so to speak, "no catching hold" of Ascott. He meant no harm. She repeated over and over again that the lad meant no harm. He had no evil ways; was always pleasant, good-natured, and affectionate, in his own careless fashion; but he was no more to be relied on than a straw that every wind blows hither and thither; or a butterfly that never sees anything farther than the nearest flower. His was, in short, the pleasure-loving temperament, not positively sinful or sensual, but still holding pleasure as the greatest and only good: and regarding what deeper natures call "duty," and find therein their stronghold and consolation, as a mere bugbear, or a sentimental theory, or a useless folly.

Poor lad! and he had the world to fight with; how would it use him? Even if no heavy sorrows for himself or others smote

him, his handsome face would have to grow old, his strong frame to meet sickness — death. How would he do it? That is the thought which always recurs. What is *the end* of such men as these? Alas! the answer would come from hospital wards, almshouses and work-houses, debtors' prisons and lunatic asylums.

To apprehensions like this — except the last, the end, which happily as yet seemed far off—Hilary had been slowly and sadly arriving about Ascott; and her conversation with him to-night seemed to make them darken down upon her with added gloom. As she went upstairs, she set her lips together hard.

"I see there is nobody to do anything, or earn anything, except me. But I must not tell Johanna."

She lay long awake, planning every conceivable scheme for saving or gaining money; till at length, her wits sharpened by the desperation of the circumstances, there flashed upon her an idea that came out of a talk she had had with Elizabeth that morning. True, it was a perfectly new

and untried chance — and a mere chance; still she felt it right to overlook nothing. She would not have ventured to tell Selina of it for the world, and even to Johanna, she only said — finding her as wakeful as herself — said it in a careless manner, as if it had relation to nothing, and she expected nothing from it —

"I think, as I have nothing else to do, I will go and see Miss Balquidder to-morrow morning."

CHAPTER XIII.

Miss Balquidder's house was a handsome one, handsomely furnished, and a neat little maid-servant showed Hilary at once into the dining-parlour, where the mistress sat before a business-like writing-table, covered with letters, papers, &c., all arranged with the careful order in disorder, which indicates even in the smallest things the possession of that accurate methodical mind—than which there are few better possessions, either to its owner or to the world at large.

Miss Balquidder was not a personable woman; she had never been so even in youth; and age had told its tale upon those large, strong features—"thoroughly Scotch features," they would have been called by those who think all Scotchwomen are necessarily big, raw-boned, and ugly, and have

never seen that wonderfully noble beauty, not prettiness, but actual beauty, in its highest physical as well as spiritual development, which is not seldom found across the Tweed.

But while there was nothing lovely, there was nothing unpleasant or uncomely in Miss Balquidder. Her large figure, in its plain black silk dress; her neat white cap, from under which peeped the little round curls of flaxen hair, neither grey nor snowy, but real "lint-white locks" still; and her good-humoured motherly look—motherly, rather than old-maidish—gave an impression which may be best described by the word "comfortable." She was a "comfortable" woman. She had that quality, too rare, alas! in all people, and rarest in women going solitary down the hill of life, of being able, out of the deep content of her own nature, to make other people content also.

Hilary was cheered in spite of herself; it always conveys hope to the young when in sore trouble, if they see the old looking happy.

"Welcome, my dear; I was afraid you had forgotten your promise."

"Oh, no," said Hilary, responding heartily to the hearty clasp of a hand large as a man's, but soft as a woman's.

"Why did you not come sooner?"

More than one possible excuse flashed through Hilary's mind, but she was too honest to give it. She gave none at all. Nor did she like to leave the impression that this was merely a visit, when she knew she had only come from secondary and personal motives. She therefore said, without answering the question,

"May I tell you why I came to-day? Because I want advice and help, and I think you can give it, from something I heard about you."

"Indeed? From whom?"

"In rather a round-about way; from Mrs. Jones, who told our maid-servant."

"The same girl I met on the staircase at your house? I beg your pardon, but I know where you live, Miss Leaf; your landlady happens to be an acquaintance of mine."

"So she said; and she told our Elizabeth that you were a rich and benevolent woman, who took a great interest in helping other women—not in money"—blushing scarlet at the idea—"I don't mean that, but in procuring them work. I want work—oh, so terribly! If you only knew!"

"Sit down, my dear;" for Hilary was trembling much, her voice breaking, and her eyes filling, in spite of all her self-command.

Miss Balquidder—who seemed accustomed to wait upon herself—went out of the room, and returned with cake and glasses; then she took the wine from the sideboard, poured some out for herself and Hilary, and began to talk.

"It is nearly my luncheon-time, and I am a great friend to regular eating and drinking. I never let anything interfere with my own meals, or other folk's either, if I can help it. I would as soon expect that fire to keep itself up without coals, as my mind to go on working, if I don't look after my body. You understand? You

seem to have good health, Miss Leaf. I hope you are a prudent girl, and take care of it ?"

"I think I do;" and Hilary smiled. "At any rate my sister does for me, and also Elizabeth."

"Ah, I liked the look of that girl. If families did but know that the most useful patent of respectability they can carry about with them is their servant! Show me the maid, and I 'll make a tolerably good guess what like is the mistress."

"There 's reason in it too," said Hilary, amused and drawn out of herself by the frank manner and the cordial voice — I use the adjective advisedly: none the less sweet because its good terse English had a decided Scotch accent, with here and there a Scotch word. Also there was about Miss Balquidder a certain dry humour essentially Scotch, — neither Irish "wit" nor English "fun," but Scotch humour; a little ponderous perhaps, yet sparkling; like the sparkles from a large lump of coal, red-warm at the heart, and capable of warming a whole household.

As many a time it had warmed the little household at Stowbury—for Robert Lyon had it in perfection. Like a waft as from old times, it made Hilary at once feel at home with Miss Balquidder.

Equally, Miss Balquidder might have seen something in this girl's patient, heroic, forlorn youth which reminded her of her own. Unreasoning as these sudden attractions appear, there is often a hidden something beneath, which in reality makes them both natural and probable, as was the case here. In half an hour these two women were sitting talking like old friends; and Hilary had explained her present position, needs, and desires. All ended in the one cry—familiar to how many thousands more of helpless young women!—"I want work!"

Miss Balquidder listened thoughtfully. Not that it was a new story—alas, she heard it every day! but there was something new in the telling of it: such extreme directness and simplicity, such utter want of either false pride or false shame. No asking of favours, and yet no shrinking

from well-meant kindness: the poor woman speaking freely to the rich one, recognising the common womanhood of both, and never supposing for an instant that mere money or position could make any difference between them.

The story ended, both turned, as was the character of both, to the practical application of it — what it was that Hilary needed, and what Miss Balquidder could supply.

The latter said, after a turn or two up and down the room, with her hands behind her — the only masculine trick she had —

"My dear, before going further, I ought to tell you one thing — I am not a lady."

Hilary looked at her in no little bewilderment.

"That is," explained Miss Balquidder, laughing, "not an educated gentlewoman like you. I made my money myself — in trade. I kept an outfitter's shop."

"You must have kept it uncommonly well," was the involuntary reply; which, in its extreme honesty and *naïveté*, was per-

haps the best thing that Hilary could have said.

"Well, I think I did;" and Miss Balquidder laughed her hearty laugh, betraying one of her few weaknesses — a consciousness of her own capabilities as a woman of business, and a pleasure at her own deserved success.

"Therefore, you see, I cannot help you as a governess. Perhaps I would not if I could, for, so far as I see, a good clearance of one half the governesses extant into honest trades would be for their own benefit, and greatly for the benefit of the other half. But that's not my affair. I only meddle with things I understand. Miss Leaf, would you object to keep a shop?"

It is no reflection upon Hilary to confess that this point-blank question startled her. Her bringing-up had been strictly among the professional class: and in the provinces sharper than even in London is drawn the line between the richest tradesman who "keeps a shop," and the poorest lawyer, doctor, or clergyman who ever starved in

decent gentility. It had been often a struggle for Hilary Leaf's girlish pride to have to teach A B C to little boys and girls whose parents stood behind counters; but as she grew older she grew wiser, and intercourse with Robert Lyon had taught her much. She never forgot one day, when Selina asked him something about his grandfather or great-grandfather, and he answered quickly, smiling, "Well, I suppose I had one, but I really never heard." Nevertheless it takes long to conquer entirely the class prejudices of years, nay, more, of generations. In spite of her will Hilary felt herself wince, and the colour rush all over her face, at Miss Balquidder's question.

"Take time to answer, and speak out, my dear. Don't be afraid. You'll not offend me."

The kindly, cheerful tone made Hilary recover her balance immediately.

"I never thought of it before; the possibility of such a thing did not occur to me; but I hope I should not be ashamed of

any honest work for which I was competent. Only — to serve in a shop — to wait upon strangers;—I am so horribly shy of strangers." And again the sensitive colour rushed in a perfect tide over cheeks and forehead.

Miss Balquidder looked half amused, half compassionately at her.

"No, my dear, you would not make a good shopwoman; at least there are many better fitted for it than you; and it is my maxim that people should try to find out, and to do, only that which they are best fitted for. If they did, we might not have so many cases of proud despair and ambitious failure in the world. It looks very grand and interesting sometimes to try and do what you can't do, and then tear your hair, and think the world has ill-used you — very grand, but very silly; when all the while, perhaps, there is something else you can do, and do thoroughly well; and the world will be exceedingly obliged to you for doing it — and for *not* doing the other thing. As doubtless the world was to me,

when, instead of being a mediocre musician, as I once ardently wished to be — it 's true, my dear — I took to keeping one of the best ladies' outfitting warehouses in London."

While she talked, her companion had quite recovered herself, and Miss Balquidder then went on to relate, what I will tell more briefly, if less graphically, than did the good Scotswoman; who, like all who have had a hard struggle in their youth, liked a little to dilate upon it in her easy old age.

Hard as it was, however, the battle had ended early, for at fifty she found herself a woman of independent property, without kith or kin, still active, energetic, and capable of enjoying life. She applied her mind to find out what she could best do with herself and her money.

"I might have bought a landed estate to be inherited by — nobody; or a house in Belgravia, and an opera-box, to be shared by — nobody. We all have our pet luxuries; none of these were exactly mine."

"No," assented Hilary, somewhat ab-

stractedly. She was thinking, if *she* could make a fortune, and — and give it away! if, by any means, any honourable, upright heart could be made to understand that it did not signify, in reality, which side the money came from; that it sometimes showed deeper, ay, the very deepest attachment, when a proud poor man had self-respect and courage enough to tell a woman plainly, "I love you, and I *will* marry you. I am not such a coward as to be afraid of your gold."

But, oh! what a ridiculous dream! — while she sat there, the penniless Hilary Leaf, listening to Miss Balquidder, the rich lady, whose life seemed so easy. For the moment, perhaps, her own appeared hard. But she had hope, and she was young. She knew nothing of the weary years upon years that Miss Balquidder had lived through before those kind eyes looked as clear and cloudless as now; before the voice gained the sweet evenness of tone which she liked to listen to, and felt that it made her quiet and "good," almost like Johanna's.

"You see, my dear," said Miss Balquidder, "when one has no duties, one must just make them; when we have nobody to care for us, we must take to caring for everybody. I suppose"—here a slight pause indicated that this life, like all women's lives, had had its tale, now long, long told—"I suppose I was not meant to be a wife; but I am quite certain I was meant to be a mother. And"—with her peculiar, bright, humourous look—"you 'd be astonished, Miss Leaf, if you knew what lots of adopted 'children' I have in all parts of the world."

Miss Balquidder then went on to explain, that finding, from her own experience, how great was the number, and how sore the trial, of young women who now-a-days are obliged to work—obliged to forget that there is such a thing as the blessed privilege of being worked for—she had set herself, in her small way, to try and help them. Her pet project was to induce educated women to quit the genteel starvation of governess-ship for some good trade,

thereby bringing higher intelligence into a class which needed, not the elevation of the work itself, which was comparatively easy and refined, but of the workers. She had, therefore, invested sum after sum of her capital in setting up various small shops in the environs of London, in her own former line, and others — stationers, lace-shops, &c. — trades which could be well carried on by women. Into the management of these she put as many young girls as she could find really fitted for it, or willing to learn, paying them regular salaries, large or small, according to their deserts.

"Fair work, fair pay; not one penny more or less; it would not be honest. I overlook each business myself, and it is carried on in my name. Sometimes it brings me a little profit; sometimes none. Of course," she added, "I would rather have profits than losses; still, I balance one against the other, and the total account leaves me generally a small yearly interest for my money—two or three per cent., which is all I care about. Thus, you see, I

and my young people make a fair bargain on both sides: it is no charity; I don't believe in charity."

"No," said Hilary, feeling her spirits rise. She was yet young enough, yet enough unworn by the fight, to feel the deliciousness of work — honest work for honest pay. "I think I could do it," she added. "I think, with a little practice, I really could keep a shop."

"At all events, perhaps you could do what I find more difficult to get done, and well done, for it requires a far higher class of women than generally apply — you could keep the accounts of a shop; you should be the head, and it would be easy to find the hands. Let me see; there is a young lady, she has managed my stationer's business at Kensington these two years, and now she is going to be married. Are you good at figures; do you understand book-keeping?"

And suddenly changing into the woman of business, and one who was evidently well accustomed both to arrange and command, Miss Balquidder put Hilary through

a sort of extempore arithmetical catechism, from which she came off with flying colours.

"I only wish there were more like you. I wish there were more young ladies brought up like —"

"Like boys!" said Hilary, laughing; "for I always used to say that was my case."

"No, I never desire to see young women made into men." And Miss Balquidder seemed a little scandalised. "But I do wish girls were taught fewer accomplishments, and more reading, writing, and arithmetic; were made as accurate, orderly, and self-dependent as boys are. But to business. Will you take the management of my stationer's shop?"

Hilary's breath came hard and fast. Much as she had longed for work, to get this sort of work, — to keep a stationer's shop! What would her sisters say? what would *he* say? But she dared not think of that just now.

"How much should I be able to earn, do you think?"

Miss Balquidder considered a moment, and then said, rather shortly — for it was not exactly acting on her own principles; she knew the pay was above the work — "I will give you a hundred a year."

A hundred a year! actually certain, and over and above any other income. It seemed a fortune to poor Hilary.

"Will you allow me a day or two to think about it, and consult my sisters?"

She spoke quietly, but Miss Balquidder could see how agitated she was; how she evidently struggled with many feelings that would be best struggled with alone. The good old lady rose.

"Take your own time, my dear; I will keep the situation open for you for one week from this date. And now I must send you away, for I have a great deal to do."

They parted, quite like friends; and Hilary went out, walking quickly, feeling neither the wind nor the rain. Yet when she reached No. 15, she could not bring herself to enter, but took another turn or

two round the Crescent, trying to be quite sure of her own mind before she opened the matter to her sisters. And there was one little battle to be fought which the sisters did not know.

It was perhaps foolish, seeing she did not belong to him in any open way, and he had no external right over her life or her actions, that she should go back and back to the question, "What would Robert Lyon say?"

He knew she earned her daily bread; sometimes this had seemed to vex and annoy him, but it must be done; and when a thing was inevitable, it was not Mr. Lyon's way to say much about it. But being a governess was an accredited and customary mode of a young lady's gaining her livelihood. Keeping a shop was different. What if he should think it too public, too unfeminine? he had such a horror of a woman's being anything but a woman, as strong and brave as she could, but in a womanly way; doing anything, however painful, that she was obliged to do, but nothing out of whim or

bravado, or the excitement of stepping out of her own sphere into man's. Would Robert Lyon think less of her, Hilary, because she had to learn to take care of herself, to protect herself, and to act in so many ways for herself, contrary to the natural and right order of things? That old order—God forbid it should ever change!—which ordained that the women should be "keepers at home;" happy rulers of that happy little world,—which seemed as far off as the next world from this poor Hilary.

"What if he should look down upon me? What if he should return, and find me different from what he expected?" And bitter tears burned in her eyes, as she walked rapidly and passionately along the deserted street. Then a revulsion came.

"No; love is worth nothing that is not worth everything, and to be trusted through everything. If he *could* forget me—*could* love any one better than me — me myself, no matter what I was, ugly or pretty, old or young, rich or poor—I would not care for his love. It would not be worth my

having; I'd let it go. Robert, though it broke my heart, I 'd let you go."

Her eyes flashed; her poor little hand clenched itself under her shawl; and then, as a half reproach, she heard in fancy the steady, loving voice—which could have calmed her wildest paroxysm of passion and pain—"You must trust me, Hilary."

Yes, he was a man to be trusted. No doubt, very much like other men, and by no means such a hero to the world at large as this fond girl made him out to be; but Robert Lyon had, with all people, and under all circumstances, the character of reliableness. He had also—you might read it in his face—a quality equally rare, faithfulness. Not merely sincerity, but faithfulness; the power of conceiving one clear purpose or one strong love—in unity is strength;—and of not only keeping true to it at the time, but of holding fast to it with that single-minded persistency which never even takes in the idea of voluntary change, as long as persistency is right or possible.

"Robert, Robert," sobbed this forlorn girl, as if slowly waking up to a sense of her forlornness, and of the almost universal fickleness, not actual falseness, but fickleness, which prevails in the world and among mankind, "Oh, Robert, be faithful! faithful to yourself—faithful to me!"

CHAPTER XIV.

When Miss Hilary reached home, Elizabeth opened the door to her; the parlour was deserted.

Miss Leaf had gone to lie down, and Miss Selina was away to see the Lord Mayor's show with Mr. Peter Ascott.

"With Mr. Peter Ascott!" Hilary was a little surprised; but, on second thoughts, she found it natural; Selina was glad of any amusement—to her, not only the narrowness but the dulness of their poverty was inexpressibly galling. "She will be back to dinner, I suppose?"

"I don't know," said Elizabeth, briefly.

Had Miss Hilary been less pre-occupied, she would have noticed something not quite right about the girl—something that at any other time would have aroused the

direct question, "What is wrong with you, Elizabeth?" For Miss Hilary did not consider it beneath her dignity to observe that matters might occasionally go wrong with this solitary young woman, away from her friends, and exposed to all the annoyances of London lodgings, where many little things might be happening to worry and perplex her. If the mistress could not set them right, she could at least give the word of kindly sympathy, as precious to "a poor servant" as to the queen on her throne.

This time, however, it came not, and Elizabeth disappeared below stairs immediately.

The girl was revolving in her own mind a difficult ethical question. To-day, for the first time in her life, she had *not* "told Miss Hilary everything." Two important things had happened, and she could not make up her mind as to whether she ought to communicate them.

Now, Elizabeth had a conscience, by nature a very tender one, and which, from circumstances, had been cultivated into a

much higher sensitiveness than, alas! is common in her class, or, indeed, in any class. This, if an error, was Miss Hilary's doing: it probably caused Elizabeth a few more miseries, and vexations, and painful shocks in the world than she would have had, had she imbibed only the ordinary tone of morality, especially the morality of ordinary domestic servants; but surely it was an error for which no repentance was needed.

Elizabeth's first trial had happened at breakfast time. Ascott, descending earlier than his wont, had asked her, Did any gentleman, short and dirty, with a hooked nose, inquire for him yesterday?

Elizabeth thought a minute, and recollected that some person, answering the above not too flattering description, had called, but refused to leave his name, saying he did not know the ladies, but was a particular friend of Mr. Leaf's.

Ascott laughed. "So he is—a very particular friend; but my aunts would not fancy him, and I don't want him to come

here. Say, if he calls, that I'm gone out of town."

"Very well, sir. Shall you start before dinner?" said Elizabeth, whose practical mind immediately recurred to that meal, and to the joint, always contrived to be hot on the days that Ascott dined at home.

He seemed excessively tickled. "Bless you, you are the greatest innocent! Just say what I tell you and never mind—hush! here comes Aunt Hilary."

And Miss Hilary's anxious face, white with long wakefulness, had put out of Elizabeth's head the answer that was coming; indeed, the matter slipped from her mind altogether, in consequence of another circumstance, which happened soon after, and gave her much more perplexity.

During her young mistress's absence, Elizabeth, supposing Miss Selina out too, and Miss Leaf up stairs, had suddenly come into the parlour without knocking. There, to her amazement, she saw Miss Selina and Mr. Peter Ascott standing in close conversation. They were so engrossed that

they did not notice her, and she shut the door again immediately. But what confounded her was that she was certain, absolutely certain, Mr. Ascott had his arm round Miss Selina's waist.

Now, that was no business of hers, and yet the faithful domestic was a good deal troubled; still more so when, by Miss Leaf's excessive surprise at hearing of the visitor who had come and gone, carrying Miss Selina away to the city, she was certain the elder sister was completely in the dark as to anything going to happen in the family.

Could it be a wedding? Could Miss Selina really love, and be intending to marry, that horrid little man? For, strange to say, this young servant had, what many a young beauty of rank and fashion has not, or has lost for ever—the true, pure, womanly creed, that loving and marrying are synonymous terms; that to let a man put his arm round your waist when you do not intend to marry him, or to intend to marry him for money or anything else when you do not

really love him, are things quite impossible and incredible to any womanly mind. A creed somewhat out of date, and perhaps existing only in stray nooks of the world; but, thank God! it does exist. Hilary had it, and she had taught it to Elizabeth.

"I wonder whether Miss Hilary knows of this? I wonder what she would say to it?"

And now arose the perplexing ethical question aforesaid, as to whether Elizabeth ought or ought not to tell her mistress.

It was one of Miss Hilary's doctrines—the same for the kitchen as for the parlour, nay, preached strongest in the kitchen, where the mysteries of the parlour are so often cruelly exposed—that a secret accidentally found out should be kept as sacred as if actually confided; also, that the secret of an enemy should no more be betrayed than that of a beloved and trusting friend.

"Miss Selina isn't my enemy," thought Elizabeth; "but I 'm not over-fond of her, and so I 'd rather not tell of her, or vex her,

if I can help it. Anyhow, I 'll keep it to myself for a bit."

But the secret weighed heavily upon her, and besides, her honest heart felt a certain diminution of respect for Miss Selina. What could she see to like in that common-looking, commonplace man, whom she could not have met a dozen times, of whose domestic life she knew nothing, and whose personality Elizabeth, with the sharp observation often found in her class, probably because coarse people do not care to hide their coarseness from servants, had speedily set down at her own valuation — "Neither carriage nor horses, nor nothing, will ever make *him* a gentleman!"

He, however, sent Miss Selina home magnificently in the said carriage; Ascott with her, who had been picked up somewhere in the city, and who, to Elizabeth's surprise, came in to his dinner, without making the slightest reference to going out of town.

But in spite of her Lord Mayor's Show, and the great attention which she said she had received from "various members of the

Common Council of the City of London," Miss Selina was, for her, rather meditative, and did not talk nearly so much as usual. There was in the little parlour an uncomfortable atmosphere, as if all of them had something on their minds. Hilary felt that the ice must be broken, and if she did not do it nobody else would. So she said, stealing her hand into Johanna's, under shelter of the dim firelight—

"Selina, I wanted to have a little family consultation. I have just received an offer."

"An offer!" repeated Miss Selina, with a visible start. "Oh, I forgot: you went to see your friend Miss Balquidder this morning. Did you get anything out of her? Has she any nephews and nieces wanting a governess?"

"She has no relations at all. But I will just tell you the story of my visit."

"I hope it 's interesting," said Ascott, who was lying on the sofa, half asleep — his general habit after dinner. He woke, however, during his aunt Hilary's relation, and

when she reached its climax, that the offer was for her to manage a stationer's shop, he burst out laughing—

"Well, that is a bright idea! I'll come and buy of you. You 'll look so pretty standing behind a counter."

But Selina said, angrily, "She cannot even think of such a thing. It would be a disgrace to the family."

"No," said Hilary, clasping tightly her eldest sister's hand—they two had already talked the matter over: "I cannot see any disgrace in it. If our family is so poor that the women must earn their living as well as the men, all we have to take care of is that it should be honestly earned. What do you say, Ascott?"

She looked earnestly at him; she wanted sorely to find out what he really thought.

But Ascott took it, as he did everything, very easily. "I don't see why Aunt Selina should make such a fuss! Why need you do anything, Aunt Hilary? Can't we hold out a little longer, and live upon tick till I get into practice? Of course, I shall then

maintain you all; I 'm the head of the family. How horridly dark this room is!"

He started up, and gave the fire a fierce poke, which consumed in five minutes a large lump of coal that Hilary had hoped — oh, cruel, sordid economy! — would have lasted half the evening.

She broke the uneasy silence which followed, by asking Johanna to give her opinion.

Johanna roused herself and spoke—

"Ascott says right; he is the head of the family, and by and bye I trust will take care of us all. But he is not able to do it now, and, meantime, we must live."

"To be sure we must, Auntie."

"I mean, my boy, we must live honestly; we must not run into debt;" and her voice sharpened, as with the reflected horror of her young days, if, alas! there ever had been any youth for Henry Leaf's eldest daughter. "No, Ascott, out of debt, out of danger. For myself," she laid her thin fingers on his arm, and looked up at him with a pitiful mixture of reliance and

hopelessness, "I would rather see you breaking stones in the road than living like a gentleman, as you call it, and a swindler, as I call it—upon other people's money."

Ascott sprang up, colouring violently. "You use strong language, Aunt Johanna. Never mind. I dare say you are right. However, it's no business of mine. Good night, for I have an engagement."

Hilary said gravely she wished he would stay and join in the family consultation.

"Oh, no; I hate talking over things. Settle it among yourselves. As I said, it isn't my business."

"You don't care, then, what becomes of us all? I sometimes begin to think so."

Struck by the tone, Ascott stopped in the act of putting on his lilac kid gloves. "No!" he cried; "I may be a very bad fellow, but I 'm not quite so bad as that, Aunt Hilary."

"She didn't mean it, my boy," said Aunt Johanna, tenderly.

He was moved, more by the tenderness than the reproach. He came and kissed

his eldest aunt in that warm-hearted, impulsive way which had won him forgiveness for many a boyish fault. It did so now.

"I know I 'm not half good enough to you, Auntie, but I mean to be. I mean to work hard, and be a rich man some day; and then you may be sure I shall not let my aunt Hilary keep a shop. Now, good night, for I must meet a fellow on business — really business — that may turn out good for us all, I assure you."

He went away whistling, with that air of untroubled, good-natured liveliness peculiar to Ascott Leaf, which made them say continually that he was "only a boy," living a boy's life, thoughtless as free. When his handsome face disappeared from their sight, the three women sat down again round the fire.

They made no comments on him whatever; they were women, and he was their own. But—passing him over as if he had never existed—Hilary began to explain to her sisters all particulars of her new scheme for maintaining the family. She told these

details in a matter-of-fact way, as already arranged, and finally hoped Selina would make no more objections.

"It is a thing quite impossible," said Selina, with dignity.

"Why impossible? I could certainly do the work; and it would not make me less of a lady. Besides, we had better not be ladies, if we cannot be honest ones. And, Selina, where is the money to come from? We have none in the house; we cannot get any till Christmas."

"Opportunities might occur. We have friends."

"Not one in London: except, perhaps, Mr. Ascott, and I would not ask him for a farthing. You don't see, Selina, how horrible it would be to be helped—unless by some one whom one dearly loved. I couldn't bear it! I'd rather beg, starve; almost steal!"

"Don't be violent, child."

"Oh, but it's hard!" and the cry of long-smothered pain burst out. "Hard enough to have to earn one's bread in a way

one does not like; harder still to have to be parted from Johanna—as I shall be—from Monday morning till Saturday night. But I will go. It's a choice between hunger, debt, and work; the first is unpleasant; the second impossible; the third is my only alternative. You must consent, Selina, for I *will* do it."

"Don't!" Selina spoke more gently, and not without some natural emotion—"don't disgrace me, child. For I may as well tell you—I meant to do so to-night—Mr. Ascott has made me an offer of marriage, and I —I have accepted it."

Had a thunderbolt fallen in the middle of the parlour at No. 15, its inmates—that is, two of them—could not have been more astounded.

No doubt this surprise was a great instance of simplicity on their part. Many women would have prognosticated, nay planned the thing from the very first; would have thought it a most excellent match; seen glorious visions of the house in Russell Square; of the wealth and

luxury that would be the portion of "dear Selina," and the general benefit that such a marriage would be to the whole Leaf family.

But these two were different. They only saw their sister Selina, a woman no longer young, and not without her peculiarities, going to be married to a man of whom she knew little or nothing; a man whom they themselves had endured rather than liked, and that merely from gratitude. He was trying enough as a chance visitor; but to look upon Mr. Ascott in the light of a brother-in-law, a husband—

"Oh, Selina, you cannot be in earnest?"

"Why not? Why should I not be married as well as my neighbours?" said she, sharply.

Nobody arguing that point, both ladies being indeed too much bewildered to argue at all, she continued majestically—

"I assure you, sisters, there could not be a more unexceptionable offer. It is true, Mr. Ascott's origin was rather humble; but I can overlook that. With his present wealth, position, and character, he will, I doubt not, make the best of husbands."

Not a word was answered; what could be answered? Selina was free to marry if she liked, and whom she liked. Perhaps, from her nature, it was idle to expect her to marry in any other way than this; one of the thousand and one unions where the man desires a handsome lady-like wife for the head of his establishment, and the woman wishes an elegant establishment to be mistress of; so they strike a bargain—possibly as good as most other bargains.

Still, with one faint lingering of hope, Hilary asked if she had quite decided?

"Quite. He wrote to me last night, and I gave him his answer this morning."

Selina certainly had not troubled anybody with her "love affairs." It was entirely a matter of business.

Her sisters saw at once that she had made up her mind. Henceforward there could be no criticism of Mr. Peter Ascott.

Now all was told, she talked freely of her excellent prospects.

"He has behaved handsomely—very

much so. He makes a good settlement on me, and says how happy he will be to help my family, so as to enable you always to make a respectable appearance."

"We are exceedingly obliged to him."

"Don't be sharp, Hilary. He means well. And he must feel that this marriage is a sort of—ahem! condescension on my part, which I never should have dreamt of twenty years ago."

Selina sighed: could it be at the thought of that twenty years ago? Perhaps, shallow as she seemed, this woman might once have had some fancy, some ideal man whom she expected to meet and marry; possibly a very different sort of man from Mr. Peter Ascott. However, the sigh was but momentary; she plunged back again into all the arrangements of her wedding, every one of which, down to the wedding-dress, she had evidently decided.

"And therefore, you see," she added, as if the unimportant, almost forgotten item of discussion had suddenly occurred to her, "it 's quite impossible that my sister should

keep a shop. I shall tell Mr. Ascott, and you will see what he says to it."

But when Mr. Ascott appeared next day in solemn state as an accepted lover, he seemed to care very little about the matter. He thought it was a good thing for everybody to be independent; did not see why young women—he begged pardon, young ladies—should not earn their own bread if they liked. He only wished that the shop were a little farther off than Kensington, and hoped the name of Leaf would not be put over the door.

But the bride-elect, indignant and annoyed, begged her lover to interfere, and prevent the scheme from being carried out.

"Don't vex yourself, my dear Selina," said he, dryly—how Hilary started to hear this stranger use the household name—"but I can't see that it's my business to interfere. I marry you; I don't marry your whole family."

"Mr. Ascott is quite right; we will end the subject," said Johanna, with grave

dignity; while Hilary sat with burning cheeks, thinking that, miserable as the family had been, it had never till now known real degradation.

But her heart was very sore that day. In the morning had come the letter from India, never omitted, never delayed; Robert Lyon was punctual as clockwork in everything he did. It came, but this month it was a short and somewhat sad letter—hinting of failing health, uncertain prospects; full of a bitter longing to come home, and a dread that it would be years before that longing was realised.

"My only consolation is," he wrote, for once betraying himself a little, "that however hard my life out here may be, I bear it alone."

But that consolation was not so easy to Hilary. That they two should be wasting their youth apart, when just a little heap of yellow coins—of which men like Mr. Ascott had such profusion—would bring them together, and, let trials be many, or poverty hard, give them the unutterable

joy of being once more face to face and heart to heart—oh, it was sore, sore!

Yet when she went up from the parlour, where the newly-affianced couple sat together, "making-believe" a passion that did not exist, and acting out the sham courtship proper for the gentleman to pay and the lady to receive—when she shut her bedroom door, and there, sitting in the cold, read again and again Robert Lyon's letter to Johanna, so good, so honest; so sad, yet so bravely enduring—Hilary was comforted. She felt that true love, in its most unsatisfied longings, its most cruel delays, nay, even its sharpest agonies of hopeless separation, is sweeter ten thousand times than the most "respectable" of loveless marriages, such as this.

So, at the week's end, Hilary went patiently to her work at Kensington, and Selina began the preparations for her wedding.

CHAPTER XV.

In relating so much about her mistresses, I have lately seemed to overlook Elizabeth Hand.

She was a person easy enough to be overlooked. She never put herself forward, not even now, when Miss Hilary's absence caused the weight of housekeeping and domestic management to fall chiefly upon the servant. She went about her duties as soberly and silently as she had done in her girlhood; even Miss Leaf could not draw her into much demonstrativeness: she was one of those people who never "come out" till they are strongly needed, and then— But it remained to be proved what this girl could be.

Years afterwards, Hilary remembered with what a curious reticence Elizabeth used to go about in those days: how she re-

mained as old-fashioned as ever; acquired no London ways, no fripperies of dress, or flippancies of manner. Also, that she never complained of anything; though the discomforts of her lodging-house life must have been great—greater than her mistresses had any idea of at the time. Slowly, out of her rough, unpliant girlhood, was forming that character of self-reliance and self-control, which, in all ranks, makes of some women the helpers rather than the helped, the labourers rather than the pleasure-seekers; women whose constant lot it seems to be to walk on the shadowed side of life, to endure rather than to enjoy.

Elizabeth had very little actual enjoyment. She made no acquaintances, and never asked for holidays. Indeed, she did not seem to care for any. Her great treat was when, on a Sunday afternoon, Miss Hilary sometimes took her to Westminster Abbey or St. Paul's; her pleasure and gratitude at which always struck her mistress, nay, even soothed her, and won her from

her own many anxieties. It is such a blessing to be able to make any other human being, even for an hour or two, entirely happy!

Except these bright Sundays, Elizabeth's whole time was spent in waiting upon Miss Leaf, who had seemed to grow suddenly frail and old. It might be that living without her child six days out of the seven, was a greater trial than had at first appeared to the elder sister, who until now had never parted with her since she was born; or it was perhaps a more commonplace and yet natural cause, the living in London lodgings, without even a change of air from room to room; and the want of little comforts and luxuries, which, with all Hilary's care, were as impossible as ever to their limited means.

For Selina's engagement, which, as a matter of decorum, she had insisted should last six months, did not lessen expenses. Old gowns were shabby, and omnibuses impossible, to the future Mrs. Ascott of Russell Square; and though, to do her

justice, she spent as little as her self-pleasing nature could consent to do, still she spent a good deal.

"It's the last; I shall never cost you any more," she would say, complacently; and revert to that question of absorbing interest, her *trousseau*, an extremely handsome one, provided liberally by Mr. Ascott. Sorely had this arrangement jarred upon the pride of the Leaf family; yet it was inevitable. Selina must be fitted out suitably for her new position: and by no possibility could she have done this herself. But no personal favours would the other two sisters have accepted from Mr. Ascott, even had he offered them—which he did not—save a dress each for the marriage, and a card for the marriage-breakfast, which, he also arranged, was to take place at an hotel.

So, in spite of the expected wedding, there was little change in the dull life that went on at No. 15. Its only brightness was when Miss Hilary came home from Saturday to Monday. And in those brief glimpses, when, as was natural, she on her

side, and they on theirs, put on their best face, so to speak, each trying to hide from the other any special care—it so fell out that Miss Hilary never discovered a thing which, week by week, Elizabeth resolved to speak to her about, and yet never could. For it was not her own affair; it seemed like presumptuously meddling in the affairs of the family. Above all, it involved the necessity of something which looked like tale-bearing and backbiting of a person she disliked, and there was in Elizabeth—servant as she was—an instinctive chivalrous honour which made her especially anxious to be just to her enemies.

Enemy, however, is a large word to use; and yet day by day her feelings grew more bitter towards the person concerned, namely, Mr. Ascott Leaf. It was not from any badness in him; he was the sort of young man always likely to be a favourite with what would be termed his "inferiors," easy, good-tempered, and gentlemanly, giving a good deal of trouble certainly, but giving it so agreeably, that few servants would have grumbled, and paying for it—as he

apparently thought everything could be paid for—with a pleasant word and a handful of silver.

But Elizabeth's dislike to him had deeper roots. The principal one was his exceeding indifference to his aunts' affairs, great and small, from the marriage, which he briefly designated as a "jolly lark," to the sharp economies which, even with the addition of Miss Hilary's salary, were still requisite in the family. None of these latter did he ever seem to notice, except when they pressed upon himself; when he neither scolded nor argued, but simply went out and avoided them.

He was now absent from home more than ever, and apparently tried as much as possible to keep the household in the dark as to his movements—leaving at uncertain times, never saying what hour he would be back, or if he said so, never keeping to his word. This was the more annoying, as there were a number of people continually inquiring for him, hanging about the house, and waiting to see him "on business:" and some of these occasionally commented on the young gentleman in such unflattering terms,

that Elizabeth was afraid they would reach the ear of Mrs. Jones, and henceforward tried always to attend to the door herself.

But Mrs. Jones was a wide-awake woman. She had not let lodgings for thirty years for nothing. Ere long she discovered, and took good care to inform Elizabeth of her discovery, that Mr. Ascott Leaf was what is euphuistically termed "in difficulties."

And here one word, lest in telling this poor lad's story, I may be supposed to tell it harshly or uncharitably; as if there were no crime greater than that which a large portion of society seems to count as none; as if, at the merest mention of the ugly word *debt*, this rabid author flew out, and made all the ultra-virtuous persons whose history is here told, fly out like turkeys after a bit of red cloth, which is a very harmless scrap of red cloth after all.

Most true: some debtors deserve only compassion; such as the merchant suddenly failing; the tenderly-reared family who by some strange blunder or unkind kindness have been kept in ignorance of their real circumstances, and been unwittingly spend-

ing pounds for which there was only pence to pay; the various men or women who, without any laxity of principle, are such utter children in practice, that they have to learn the value and use of money by hard experience, much as a child does, and are little better than children in all that concerns L. S. D. to the end of their days.

But these are debtors by accident, not voluntary wrong-doing. The deliberate debtor, who orders what he knows he has no means of paying for; the pleasure-loving debtor, who cannot renounce one single luxury for conscience' sake; the well-meaning lazy debtor, who might make "ends meet," but does not, simply because he will not take the trouble; upon such as these it is right to have no mercy—they deserve none.

To which of these classes young Ascott Leaf belonged, his story will show. I tell it, or rather let it tell itself, and point its own moral; it is the story of hundreds and thousands.

That a young fellow should not enjoy

his youth would be hard; that it should be pleasant to him to dress well, live well, and spend with open hand upon himself, as upon others, no one will question. No one would ever wish it otherwise. Many a kindly spendthrift of twenty-one makes a prudent paterfamilias at forty; while a man who in his twenties showed a purposeless niggardliness, would at sixty grow into the most contemptible miser alive. There is something even in the thoughtless liberality of youth to which one's heart warms, even while one's wisdom reproves. But what struck Elizabeth was the fact that Ascott's liberalities were always towards himself, and himself only.

Sometimes when she took in a parcel of new clothes, while others, yet unpaid for, were tossing in wasteful disorder about his room, or when she cleaned indefinite pairs of handsome boots, and washed dozens of the finest cambric pocket-handkerchiefs, her spirit grew hot within her to remember Miss Hilary's countless wants and contrivances in the matter of dress, and all the

little domestic comforts which Miss Leaf's frail health required—things which never once seemed to cross the nephew's imagination. Of course not, it will be said; how could a young man be expected to trouble himself about these things?

But they do though. Answer, many a widow's son; many a heedful brother of orphan sisters; many a solitary clerk living and paying his way upon the merest pittance; is it not better to think of others than one-self? Can a man, even a young man, find his highest happiness in mere personal enjoyment?

However, let me cease throwing these pebbles of preaching under the wheels of my story; as it moves on, it will preach enough for itself.

Elizabeth's annoyances, suspicions, and conscience-pricks as to whether she ought or ought not to communicate both, came to an end at last. Gradually she made up her mind that, even if it did look like tale-bearing, on the following Saturday night Miss Hilary must be made acquainted with all she knew and feared.

It was an anxious week, for Miss Leaf had fallen ill. Not seriously; and she never complained until her sister had left for Kensington, when she returned to her bed, and did not again rise. She would not have Miss Hilary sent for, nor Miss Selina, who was away paying a ceremonious prenuptial visit to Mr. Ascott's partner's wife at Dulwich.

"I don't want anything that you cannot do for me. You are becoming a first-rate nurse, Elizabeth," she said, with that passive, peaceful smile which almost frightened the girl; it seemed as if she were slipping away from this world and all its cares, into another existence. Elizabeth felt that to tell her anything about her nephew's affairs was perfectly impossible. How thankful she was that in the quiet of the sick-room her mistress was kept in ignorance of the knocks and inquiries at the door, and especially of a certain ominous paper which had fallen into Mrs. Jones's hands, and informed her, as she took good care to inform Elizabeth, that any

day the "bailiffs" might be after Mr. Leaf.

"The sooner him and the whole set of you clear out of my house the better; I'm a decent, respectable woman," said Mrs. Jones, with virtuous indignation; and Elizabeth had had to beg her as a favour not to disturb her sick mistress, but to wait just one day, till Miss Hilary came home.

Also, when Ascott, ending with a cheerful and careless countenance his ten minutes after-breakfast chat in his aunt's room, had met Elizabeth on the staircase, he had stopped to bid her say, if anybody wanted him, he was gone to Birmingham, and would not be home till Monday. And on Elizabeth's hesitating, she having determined to tell no more of these involuntary lies, he had been very angry, and then had stooped to entreaties, begging her to do as he asked, or it would be the ruin of him. Which she understood well enough, when all the day she—grown painfully wise, poor girl!—watched a Jewish-looking man

hanging about the house, and watching everybody who went in or out of it.

Now, sitting at Miss Leaf's window, she fancied she saw this man disappear into the gin-palace opposite, and at the same moment a figure darted hurriedly round the street corner, and into the door of No. 15.

Elizabeth looked to see if her mistress were asleep, and then crept quietly out of the room, shutting the door after her. Listening, she heard the sound of the latch-key, and of some one coming stealthily up-stairs.

"Hollo!—Oh, it's only you, Elizabeth."

"Shall I light your candle, sir?"

But when she did, the sight was not pleasant. Drenched with rain, his collar pulled up, and his hat slouched, so as in some measure to act as a disguise, breathless and trembling, hardly anybody would have recognised in this discreditable fellow that gentlemanly young man, Mr. Ascott Leaf.

He staggered into his room, and threw himself across the bed.

"Do you want anything, sir?" said Elizabeth, from the door.

"No—yes—stay a minute. Elizabeth, are you to be trusted?"

"I hope I am, sir."

"The bailiffs are after me. I've just dodged them. If they know I'm here, the game's all up—and it will kill my aunt."

Shocked as she was, Elizabeth was glad to hear him say that—glad to see the burst of real emotion with which he flung himself down on the pillow, muttering all sorts of helpless self-accusations.

"Come, sir, 'tis no use taking on so," said she, much as she would have spoken to a child, for there was something childish rather than manlike in Ascott's distress. Nevertheless, she pitied him, with the unreasoning pity a kind heart gives to any creature who, blameworthy or not, has fallen into trouble. "What do you mean to do?"

"Nothing. I'm cleaned out. And I haven't a friend in the world."

He turned his face to the wall in perfect despair.

Elizabeth tried hard not to sit in judgment upon what the catechism would call her "betters;" and yet her own strong instinct of almost indefinite endurance turned with something approaching contempt from this weak, lightsome nature, broken by the first touch of calamity.

"Come, it's no use making things worse than they are. If nobody knows that you are here, lock your door and keep quiet. I'll bring you some dinner when I bring up missis's tea; and not even Mrs. Jones will be any the wiser."

"You're a brick, Elizabeth; a regular brick!" cried the young fellow, brightening up at the least relief. "That will be capital. Get me a good slice of beef, or ham, or something. And mind you, don't forget; a regular stunning bottle of pale ale."

"Very well, sir."

The acquiescence was somewhat sullen, and had he watched Elizabeth's face, he might have seen there an expression not too flattering. But she faithfully brought him his dinner, and kept his secret; even

though, hearing from over the staircase Mrs. Jones resolutely deny that Mr. Leaf had been at home since morning, she felt very much as if she were conniving at a lie. With a painful, half-guilty consciousness she waited for her mistress's usual question, "Is my nephew come home?" but fortunately it was not asked. Miss Leaf lay quiet and passive, and her faithful nurse settled her for the night with a strangely solemn feeling, as if she were leaving her to her last rest, safe and at peace before the overhanging storm broke upon the family.

But all shadow of this storm seemed to have passed away from him who was its cause. As soon as the house was still, Ascott crept downstairs and fell to his supper with as good an appetite as possible. He even became free and conversational.

"Don't look so glum, Elizabeth. I shall soon weather through. Old Ascott will fork out; he couldn't help it. I'm to be his nephew, you know. Oh, that was a clever catch of Aunt Selina's. If only Aunt Hilary would try another like it."

"If you please, sir, I'm going to bed."

"Off with you, then, and I'll not forget the gown at Christmas. You 're a sharp young woman, and I'm much obliged to you." And for a moment he looked as if he were about to make the usual unmannerly acknowledgment of civility from a young gentleman to a servant maid—viz. kissing her—but he pulled a face and drew back. He really couldn't; she was so very plain.

At this moment there came a violent ring, and "Fire!" was shouted through the keyhole of the door. Terrified, Elizabeth opened it, when, with a burst of laughter, a man rushed in, and laid hands upon Ascott.

It was the sheriff's officer.

When his trouble came upon him, Ascott's manliness returned. He turned very white, but he made no opposition—had even enough of his wits about him—or something better than wits—to stop Mrs. Jones from rushing up in alarm and indignation to arouse Miss Leaf.

"No; she'll know it quite soon enough. Let her sleep till morning. Elizabeth, look

here." He wrote upon a card the address of the place he was to be taken to. "Give Aunt Hilary this. Say, if she can think of a way to get me out of this horrid mess, I should be glad—but I don't deserve it. Never mind. Come on, you fellows!"

He pulled his hat over his eyes, jumped into the cab, and was gone. The whole thing had not occupied five minutes.

Stupefied, Elizabeth stood, and considered what was best to be done. Miss Hilary must be told; but how to get at her in the middle of the night, thereby leaving her mistress to the mercy of Mrs. Jones? It would never do. Suddenly she thought of Miss Balquidder. She might send a message. No; not a message—for the family misery and disgrace must not be betrayed to a stranger—but a letter, to Kensington.

With an effort, Elizabeth composed herself sufficiently to write one—her first—to her dear Miss Hilary.

"Honoured Madam,—Mr. Leaf has got himself into trouble, and is taken away

somewhere; and I dare not tell missis; and I wish you was at home, as she is not well, but better than she has been, and she shall know nothing about it till you come.—Your obedient and affectionate servant,

"ELIZABETH HAND."

Taking Ascott's latch-key, she quitted the house, and slipt out into the dark night, almost losing her way among the gloomy squares, where she met not a creature except the solitary policeman, plashing steadily along the wet pavement. When he turned the glimmer of his bull's-eye upon her she started like a guilty creature, till she remembered that she really was doing nothing wrong, and so need not be afraid of anything. This was her simple creed, which Miss Hilary had taught her, and it upheld her, even till she knocked at Miss Balquidder's door.

There, poor girl, her heart sank, especially when Miss Balquidder, in an anomalous costume and a severe voice, opened the door herself, and asked who was there, disturbing a respectable family at this late hour?

Elizabeth answered, what she had before determined to say, as sufficiently explaining her errand, and yet betraying nothing that her mistress might wish concealed.

"Please, ma'am, I 'm Miss Leaf's servant. My missis is ill, and I want a letter sent at once to Miss Hilary."

"Oh! come in, then. Elizabeth, I think, your name is?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"What made you leave home at this hour of night? Did your mistress send you?"

"No."

"Is she so very ill? It seems sudden. I saw Miss Hilary to-day, and she knew nothing at all about it."

Elizabeth shrank a little before the keen eye that seemed to read her through.

"There 's more amiss than you have told me, young woman. Is it because your mistress is in serious danger that you want to send for her sister?"

"No."

"What is it, then? You had better tell me at once. I hate concealment."

It was a trial; but Elizabeth held her ground.

"I beg your pardon, ma'am; but I don't think missis would like anybody to know, and therefore I 'd rather not tell you."

Now the honest Scotchwoman, as she said, hated concealment—hated anything underhand, but she respected the right of every human being to maintain silence if necessary. She looked sharply in Elizabeth's face, which apparently reassured her, for she said, not unkindly—

"Very well, child, keep your mistress's secrets by all means. Only tell me what you want. Shall I take a cab, and fetch Miss Hilary at once?"

Elizabeth thanked her, but said she thought that would not do; it would be better to send the note the first thing to-morrow morning, and then Miss Hilary would come home just as if nothing had happened, and Miss Leaf would not be frightened by her sudden appearance.

"You are a good, mindful girl," said Miss Balquidder. "How did you learn to be so sensible?"

At the kindly word and manner, Elizabeth, bewildered and exhausted with the excitement she had gone through, and agitated by the feeling of having, for the first time in her life, to act on her own responsibility, gave way a little. She did not actually cry, but she was very near it.

Miss Balquidder called over the stair-head, in her quick, imperative voice—

"David, is your wife away to her bed yet?"

"No, ma'am."

"Then tell her to fetch this young woman to the kitchen, and give her some supper. And afterwards, will you see her safe home, poor lassie. She 's awfully tired, you see."

"Yes, ma'am."

And following David's grey head down the staircase, Elizabeth, for the first time since she came to London, took a comfortable meal in a comfortable kitchen, seasoned with such stories of Miss Balquidder's

goodness and generosity, that when, an hour after, she went home and to sleep, it was with a quieter and more hopeful spirit than she could have believed possible under the circumstances.

END OF THE FIRST VOLUME.

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